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Soweto Kinch

Pizza Express Dean St, London

☆☆☆☆☆

John L Walters

guardian.co.uk, Monday 11 January 2010 22.15 GMT



Giddy changes in style ... Soweto Kinch. Photograph: Steve Gillett/Livepix

Soweto Kinch was one of the young lions who made the noughties the most exciting decade for British jazz since the 60s. Now he's in his 30s, he's not exactly part of the establishment, but number one in a field that he's made his own, as saxophonist, band leader, composer and rapper/MC. Whether he's playing festivals, rock venues or cosy jazz clubs like this one, he's always prepared to challenge his audience with giddy changes in style and content.

There's no compromise in Kinch's music, which lurches from angular beats to gentle swing, from machine-gun rap to poetic introspection. He just assumes we're open-minded enough to follow his journey, presenting each transition with a smile and the patter of a Brummie comedian.

His quartet starts with Old Skoolish. An alto sax cadenza leads into broken-beat funk, with a groove that sounds like Steve Coleman's M-Base experiments with heart. The Train That Never Came is cool jazz reinvented, with eloquent double bass from Karl Rasheed-Abel.

Kinch "changes up the genre" with a chirpy audience-participation rap called Sound the Alert, before diving into the emotional Adrian's Ballad, which has a narrative and melody redolent of a Dankworth-Losey movie collaboration.

After a freestyle rap based on the letters of "pizza", he asks whether we mind being "guinea pigs". He tries out two elegantly constructed compositions – A People With No Past, and Trade – before closing with a heartfelt standard, Gershwin's Someone to Watch Over Me, and Out There, a jazz-rock epic that works better live than on record. Drummer Graham Godfrey handles the rhythmic chicanery with studied ease, while guitarist Femi Temowo is the perfect foil, musically and temperamentally, for the complexity and clarity of Kinch's musical storytelling.

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