

## LIVE REVIEW

# Xxit stage left

As the xx wind down before making a new album, it's time the Coral received the praise their music deserves, says [Kitty Empire](#)

**The xx**  
Somerset House, London WC2

**The Coral**  
Shepherd's Bush Empire, London W12

How apt that London's heatwave should break and that the sky should turn a glowering bruise-blue in time for the xx's valedictory open-air set at Somerset House. Every summer, this former Inland Revenue HQ doubles as a posh framing device for a varied slew of acts; this year's line-up is the most comprehensive yet. Only N-Dubz (who played here last week) could be more incongruous in this courtyard, so redolent of the entitlement of empire. The xx's music is intimate, working at the level of bodily tissue rather than public property. Live, they remain categorically unshowy – three static figures dressed in their trademark black with just two “x”s lighting up their stage set. Near the end, they fire off some confetti; most of it is black.

Even if you haven't bought the xx's eponymous debut, you will, by now,

know their music well. The lustrous, nagging, near-lubricious goth'n'b of last August's xx insinuated itself into countless TV soundbeds, as well as most lists praising the best albums of 2009. The ubiquity of songs such as “Intro” or “VCR”, both dispatched hauntingly tonight, is second only to Florence and the Machine's “You Got the Love” (which, of course, the xx covered). Glastonbury saw Florence join the trio on stage, but no such love-in occurs tonight. We only get the recording as exit music.

The band have been on the road for a year and half and this unspectacular but fluent gig marks the start of a gradual withdrawal from public duty to nurture their next album. “This is a moment of recognition of everything that's happened in the past year or so,” notes singing bassist Oliver Sims, in an outburst of garrulousness quite alien to the xx thus far. Perhaps he is finally getting used to the idea of people liking his band. Xx – named for their age, 20, but also just one “x” short of outright carnality – has gone gold in the UK and sold upwards of 200,000 in the US. Their performance in front of



'A sense of mystery': Lee Southall, James Skelly, Ian Skelly and Paul Duffy of the Coral at Shepherd's Bush Empire. © Brandon/Redferns

40,000 people at Coachella saw Jay-Z and Beyoncé hanging on their every sigh and R&B-indebted beat from the photographers' pit.

So there are no new songs or at least none ready to road test. The only musical development? After undersinging softly for the length of the gig, Sims and Romy Madley Croft (guitar) suddenly emphasise the word “fantasy” (on “Fantasy”) until it sounds like a shout.

“I don't suppose there are any funky house fans in the audience?” quips

## The xx's gig at Coachella saw Jay-Z and Beyoncé hang on their every sigh

Sims before triggering a typically yearning, understated cover of Kyla's “Do You Mind” (contrast theirs – bit.ly/4oWyz0 – with the original – bit.ly/16Bwoo, which virtually begs xx-ification). The crowd's sporadic attempts at dancing eventually ebb into a gentle sway. Everything about the xx is latent, not manifest; their electronic builds never, ever spill over into jubilant release.

Like the xx, the Coral were once the surprisingly young people making preternaturally evolved music. Nearly a decade on from their early EPs, the Coral have just released their sixth album, *The Butterfly House*, probably their most cogent and satisfying yet. They have lost, regained and parted company once more with guitarist Bill Ryder-Jones, leaving, oh, just the two or three guitarists to carry their masterful, country-tinged psychedelia. Singer James Skelly (bowl cut intact) and skinny, precise lead guitarist Lee Southall change guitars after every single song. If he were paid by the piece, their guitar tech would be the best-remunerated roadie in rock.

It's worth dwelling on Southall,

a precise player who executes guitar solos with all the mechanistic selflessness of the pre-rawk era. Psychedelic music is so often associated with derangement, but when the Coral wig out – as they do on a final “North Parade” – there is no loss of control, just an expert corraling of wild vintage sounds on a clearly staked-out path.

If we can just assume that verve, a sense of mystery and sonorous thrum are standard on Coral compositions as far apart as “Dreaming of You” (from their 2002 debut album) and “She's Coming Around” (new), then two fragile *Butterfly House* beauties stand out tonight. “Falling All Around You” finds Skelly without a guitar, crooning a stripped-down, country-tinged ballad, Nick Power's organ chiming gently along. “Walking in the Winter” is even prettier.

Every time the Coral come around, you wonder why this splendid band aren't more widely feted. In the past, it has been due to their zanier acts of self-sabotage (the *Nightfreak* and the *Sons of Becker* album springs to mind).

But now they have two perfectly canonical works (*Butterfly* and its predecessor, *Roots & Echoes*) under their belts. Thanks to Fleet Foxes, west coast music with close male harmonies is all the rage. The Coral's second coming should be around now, but you can't help but wonder how much bigger this purposely arcane and nostalgic outfit will get.



**I'm not playing the popularity game. If you're trying to be popular you'll be anodyne**  
Ricky Gervais interview

Observer Magazine, page 34



## FESTIVAL WATCH

**Garden festival**  
Petrane, Croatia

Where many festivals call upon one's powers of endurance, Croatia's Garden is geared towards indulgence. One of a series of dance festivals to have been established in the coastal village of Petrane, fast becoming an eastern European Ibiza, this two-weekend jamboree finds a mostly British crowd jetting over for a programme of house, funk and soul.

If the line-up wasn't exactly overburdened with big names, then it was pleasing to see lesser-known acts grab the spotlight in style: hippie hipster NYC collective the **Phenomenal Handclap Band** proved to be Saturday's highlight, while audible sighs of appreciation greeted falsetto crooner **Mayer Hawthorne** (left) and his Motown pop.

On Sunday, disco revivalists **Hercules and Love Affair** traded flirtatious badinage for cigarettes in a display of lascivious showmanship every bit as colourful as transsexual diva **Aerea Negrot's** tangerine

jumpsuit, before Berlin producer **Henrik Schwarz** brought proceedings to a head with jazzy tech-house.

But this was a festival whose most memorable moments were rooted in ambience rather than musicianship: basking in a spectacular sunset while dancing at the beach-front bar or catching the breeze on one of the twice-daily boat parties, where a set from Liverpool's **No Fakin DJs** climaxed in a mass rendition of “You've Got the Love”.

**Best act** Hercules and Love Affair. **Overheard** “Seriously, who needs football when you've got disco?” as the dreary matter of a certain sports match caused a delay to the Hercules and Love Affair set. **Best discovery** Soul boy Mayer Hawthorne. **Hugh Montgomery** *Hugh stayed at Hotel Diadora, Punta Skala (falkensteiner.com/en/hotel/diadora), and flew with Croatia Airlines (croatiaairlines.com/en)*

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