

Blind musician steals the show

Raul Midon was a one-man band, simultaneously strumming while drumming on the bongos and mimicking a trumpet with his voice. PHOTO: MATTHEW CHONG, SING JAZZ

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REVIEW / CONCERT

SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre/Sunday

The blind American singer, songwriter and guitarist Raul Midon is not a household name like his compatriot, hitmaker David Foster.

But at the Singapore International Jazz Festival on Sunday, he outclassed Foster as a musician - and as a person.

Midon (pronounced Moo-d'orh) came on just before Foster and proceeded to blow giggoers' minds with his virtuosity. His jaw clenched in determination throughout, he had to be seen to be believed. His hands were a blur of decisive, frenetic fingering and strumming, which yielded a silky, toasty tone with flamenco-like inflections. He could easily have carried the third, and final, day of this festival on his own.

"All right, be careful when you try this at home," he told the audience right before launching into his signature move, which was to mimic a trumpet with a bebop vibe by humming through pursed lips - while simultaneously strumming his guitar and banging on bongo drums.

This was how he had brought the house down on the now-defunct Late Show With David Letterman in 2006. This evening's audience greeted his gift with deafening cheers and wolf whistles.

Eight of the 10 songs in his set were from his new album, *Bad A** And Blind*, notably the soulful strut *Pedal To The Metal* and the dreamy *You & I*. On his album's titular track, he sang defiantly: "From Budapest to Bombay.../I am more than just okay .../I am a ship of rock".

His sonorous tenor, showcased in the sweetly reflective *Listen To The Rain* and the throat-lumping *Sunshine - I Can Fly*, lulled listeners such that they got lost in his funky scats, their hearts lifting to his sublime falsetto.

Foster was the night's ostensible highlight but, after Midon, he proved a letdown. Billed with a total of six singers, notably the suave Brian McKnight and the shouty Chaka Khan, he performed less and mouthed off more.

Foster should have known by now that it is the music, not the ego, that matters.

For instance, he stopped Indonesia's Dira Sugandi, just as she was about to blast "And I-eee-iiii will always love you..." from *The Bodyguard* soundtrack, to point out to the audience that that was where they should start applauding her.

This was unctuously condescending to Sugandi, who could imitate Celine Dion and the late Whitney Houston serviceably.

He was just as condescending earlier when he trotted out a New York trio called *Thirdstory*. They could sing, in the way that frat boys can sing after a few drinks, but they could not harmonise well. When listeners did not respond to their plea to sing along, Foster intervened. "Let me show you how it's done... these are my people," he boasted.

Singapore's Nick Zavior erased everyone's memory of the trio with his sure, well-calibrated crooning of the Foster-Eric Benet song *The Last Time*. He wobbled on a few notes towards the end, but still made Singapore proud.

Before McKnight and Khan came on, Foster asked if anyone in the audience wanted to come up and sing one of his tunes. As arms flailed for his attention, he picked a portly, smartly dressed woman who called herself Rosie.

As she made her way to the stage, Foster harangued her: "You've got to walk faster, girl." When someone in the crowd told him that she was pregnant, he yelled back: "Oh. God... it's not my child, right?" Few laughed at this.

Rosie fanned her face with her fingers nervously, then unleashed a diva-worthy version of *Got To Be Real*. How the crowd roared.

McKnight was the other star in Foster's firmament this evening, enrobing *Rock With You*, *Mornin'* and *After The Love Has Gone* with his velvety voice.

Khan took over with her powerhouse pipes on Through The Fire. Somehow, she never got the memo that blasting one's way through tunes does not make for enjoyable listening.

Foster returned with a littleknown instrumental wrap and, for his encore, did a meditative piano solo. Few applauded after he finished.

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