



Last Night: Juno Reactor with Sugizo at the Independent



Juno Reactor with Sugizo

The Independent

September 23, 2008

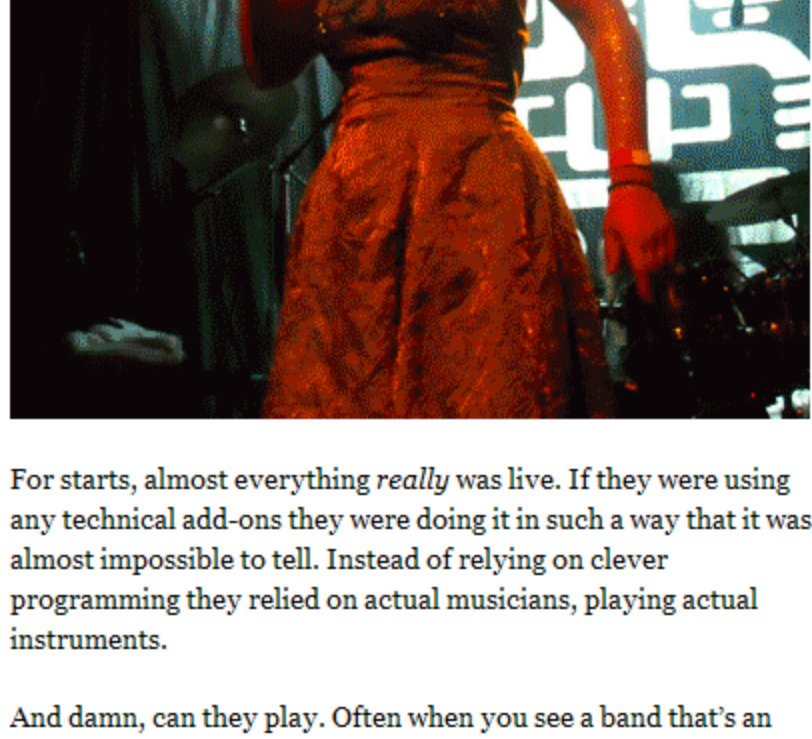
Review and photos by Kirsty Evans

Better than: Any trance band you've ever seen live.

Download/Stream: Lots of streaming media, pics and other goodies available at the band's [MySpace page](#).

When was the last time you saw a trance band that sounded better live than on record? Juno Reactor was the first for me.

Actually I wasn't quite sure what to expect. All too often trance or ambient shows end up being just a couple of guys standing around twiddling knobs and typing things into their laptops, which really isn't very exciting to watch. Juno Reactor was completely different.



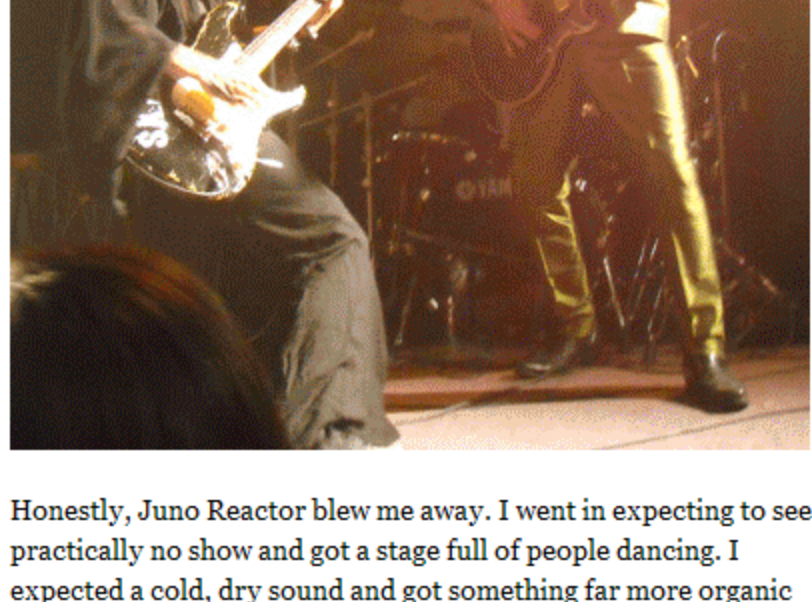
For starts, almost everything *really* was live. If they were using any technical add-ons they were doing it in such a way that it was almost impossible to tell. Instead of relying on clever programming they relied on actual musicians, playing actual instruments.

And damn, can they play. Often when you see a band that's an ensemble, the different elements don't quite gel, and one or two people end up dominating the whole show, but that wasn't what happened at Juno Reactor...It was quite remarkable. With this many moving pieces it would be easy for the show to be a huge mess, and yet it wasn't. Instead everyone played off of each other, creating an effect where the sum was greater than the parts. I find myself wanting to use words like synergy, but that's a bit too wanky. Maybe call it a perfect intersection, a crossroads. A group of talented people coming together and actually enjoying what they can all gain from working together.



It's a very rich sound that Juno Reactor creates. Layered. Complex. Full of distinct but complementary rhythms and melodies that all somehow fit together seamlessly.

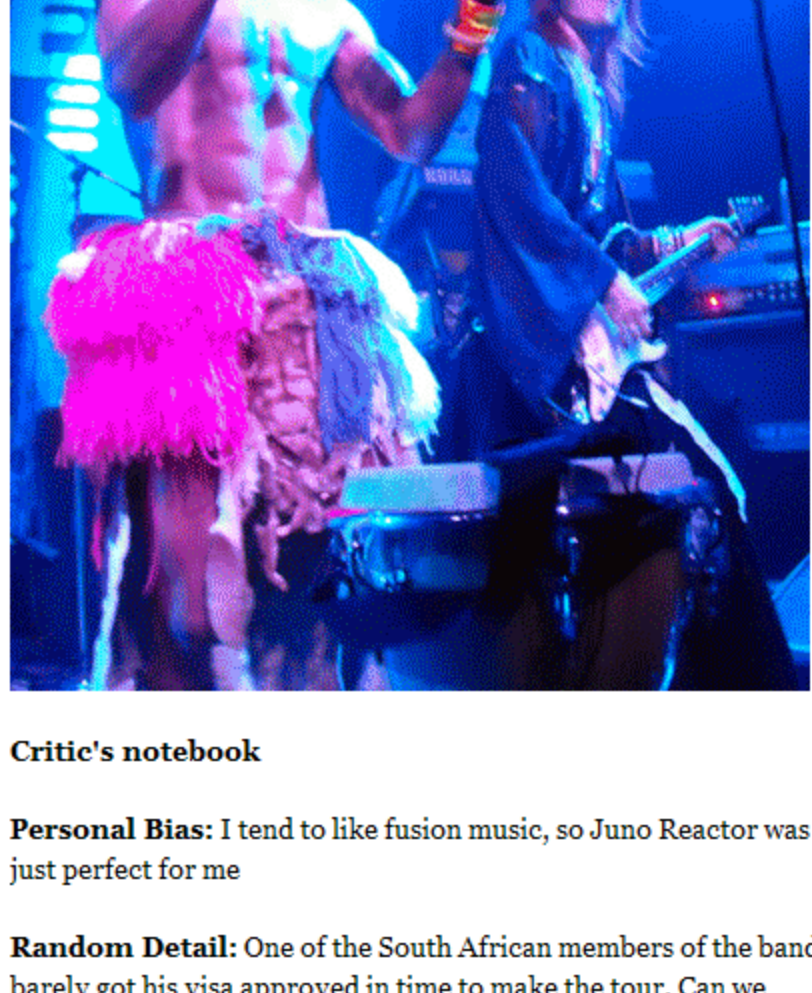
Fusion. It's something that a lot of bands claim to be doing, but in fact very few are. Juno Reactor is one of the rare bands to actually pull it off. Two singers, a white woman and a black man, and creator Ben Watkins, a Brit, a legendary Japanese guitar player who at one point in the show broke out his violin, a trio of South African drummers, two of whom also played a number of other instruments, and one who sang -- on paper it probably shouldn't work, but it does. And like all the best fusion projects, it's hard to explain, because how do you describe something unique? Some of the rhythms were clearly African, but the melodic lines were often classic ambient. It's a sexy sound, that's for sure, and more than a little trippy. But then that's not quite right either, because normally trippy music is a bit sleep-inducing but this was one of the most high energy shows I've seen in a long time. It was just so overwhelmingly positive. Normally you need drugs to get this kind of high, but these guys do it with music. Why can't more bands do that?



Honestly, Juno Reactor blew me away. I went in expecting to see practically no show and got a stage full of people dancing. I expected a cold, dry sound and got something far more organic than I've ever heard from a trance act before.

After the show Watkins was joking that the band are "a bit too global" and, although it's clear that their diversity must present some logistical problems, I have to disagree -- there's no such thing as too global. What is music, or any other kind of art, for if not to break down boundaries, help people to connect? That's why, done right, fusion is a beautiful thing.

Even if you don't think you like trance or ambient, go see this band if you get the chance.



Critic's notebook

Personal Bias: I tend to like fusion music, so Juno Reactor was just perfect for me

Random Detail: One of the South African members of the band barely got his visa approved in time to make the tour. Can we please stop pretending Homeland Security aren't racist now?

By the Way: Did you know Ben Watkins also did the music for The Matrix?

Also: I already knew that Sugizo was a good guitar player but holy shit! Now I understand why he's such a big star in Japan.