

Singer's thrilling primal scream

SARAH JANE MORRIS

The Bull

London EN5

SINGER Sarah Jane Morris must have been more than a little gutted when her last album failed to get a release on these shores.

The British public's loss is amply displayed at this compact north London venue.

Hitting the stage with a band stripped down to its bare minimum — a couple of guitars, bass and drums — Morris is faced by a clearly partisan crowd that fills the room with an air of electric energy.

This experienced performer certainly seems to enjoy the intimacy that The Bull offers and does not disappoint, launching into an array of songs from past and present — startling in their diversity, both in terms of musical and vocal style.

Morris has clearly seen a few things in her time, having collaborated with many top names over her career, and her maturity shines through as she engages with the audience in a relaxed way.

At times, she verges on the tongue in cheek, apologising in advance for a tune from her "angry period." The crowd's reaction to the song shows that this apology is not merited.

Another warning is offered before her "revenge on life song." Accompanied by power chords, Morris blasts out a melody full of attitude, climaxing in a prolonged, powerful scream that she manipulates until it sounds more like it's coming from an instrument than a human being. It really is spine-tingling stuff.

Her style has been compared with both Marvin Gaye and Tom Waits. From her slower numbers, it's easy to see where those comparisons come from because there are hints of both these artists in her work.

But Morris has been singing jazz and blues for years and is much more than just an imitator of style. There are flashes of invention everywhere and her ability to adapt her voice is spectacular.

The band also have a large part to play. Diversity is assured by a talented group of musicians playing blues, jazz, rock and even reggae and drum and bass.

The prospect of a full line-up, which was cut out, the singer tells us, because of the size of the venue, including percussion, saxophone and keyboard, is a mouth-watering one.

Following the debacle with her last album, Morris must hope that her forthcoming record Autumn will make it into the record shops without a hitch.

In the meantime, before she hits Europe for a string of dates, lovers of quality music can catch her at a one-off gig at Ronnie Scotts on June 23.

RICHARD BAGLEY