



## [The Straits](#) at [Liverpool Philharmonic](#) Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) October 2011

**The Straits** were formed by former members **Dire Straits** Alan Clark, Phil Palmer and Chris White, after a few fun and feeler gigs in the summer of 2011 - *to play the band's much loved catalogue of great songs* to a loyal and new audience alike. After huge success with albums including Making Movies and Brothers in Arms, in a career that saw them sell 120 million albums worldwide, receive three BRIT Awards, four Grammys and two MTV Music Awards, it's unthinkable that such a huge musical impact could be just left alone.

I think I was probably introduced to Dire Straits from a variety of directions whilst in my teenage years at school. Firstly, my next door neighbour, a real hipster of double-bass player in a jazz band in Leeds was a keen advocate of the early Dire Straits. He probably put my dad onto them, who immediately used their albums to test and demonstrate the high end speakers and headphones he manufactured for discerning audophiles. Lastly, some of the lads from school who were slightly nerdy, classically trained musicians and experimenting with various rock band line-up and music were fans.

I used to test and assess new speakers and audio equipment for my parents' business ( [PWB Electronics](#) ), and that would involve hours and hours of listening to Dire Straits as well as a variety of eclectic sources, but invariably required a good mix of bass, drums, guitar, percussion and vocals. Getting to know the lyrics and conversations between voices in lyricised stories,

intonation, mood, and dialogue between story and instruments, lifted and emphasised by tempo and pitch and whatever else the technical terms are, was unavoidable and delightfully revealing at the same time. Some Dire Straits tracks were definitely key quality reference points that could take an audio playback to a new level or immediately consign some equipment to the shockingly bad list.



'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Sultans of Swing' were definitely two killer tracks that would demonstrate the quality of audio equipment in an instant, and not unconnected were obviously hugely successful at a commercial and widening playing level. The quality throughout everything Dire Straits did gives you a profound respect for the techniques involved in musicianship - to play so tightly and exquisitely, but also for the importance of excellence at every stage in the production process - the recording, mixing, production to vinyl and later the Compact Disk (somewhat trailblazed by Dire Straits). Now I do understand the prevalence of nostalgia tribute bands, and I've been to see a few for entertainment, and although I don't think The Straits really fit into that category, there's definitely a widespread yearning for something that's missing today which The Straits may be satisfying, at least partially.

Any visit to the venue known affectionately to people around Liverpool as The Phil is always pleasureable as the surroundings are delightful and convey a certain presence befitting a great concert hall. In the days leading up to seeing The Straits, any mention of The Straits has elicited

a bemused reaction from colleagues around the Salon, and who thought that the old members of Dire Straits must indeed be in ***dire straits*** to be gigging again! Mark Knopfler is doing his own thing, recently backing Bob Dylan's sell-out European tour, there was a nagging doubt if

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were going to be just 'money for nothing'. In fairness, with the core of The Straits being comprised of a phalanx of original members with Alan Clarke on keyboards, Chris White playing that distinctive sax, and John Illsley on bass, to even consider them as a Tribute is wide of the mark - Dire Straits were always more than just padding for Mark's phenomenal talent.

The Philharmonic had quite obviously done a grand job as a full house on a dull Sunday evening is not to be sniffed at, and all that remained was to see if the band could live up to expectations. Anticipatory hubub diminished into pregnant hush, and a glittering chrome and LED bejewelled backdrop greeted the 'Sultans' as they swung on, led by new frontman Terrence Reis. It was as if the band had never been away, and as the game quickly commenced with an atmospheric opening to ***Private Investigation***, it was clear that this was no past-its-sell-by-date package. Alan on keyboards added gravitas, and it was no mystery to me why such well crafted songs remain scars for life in our minds. In addition, the new frontman gave authority to the band, and made it clear that we were listening to a production at least as good as the original.



Indeed, it's a funny thing how you're always drawn to compare with the original production, and especially with live performances, how they compare with the recorded production. For the first few songs, my initial feeling was, if anything, the band were too note perfect, with authoritative stoicism that comes from spending thousands of hours impeccably honing your technique for the perfect recording. Perhaps, because they've been apart for so long, there was a sense that these were the industry's best session musicians playing superbly but with life to the performance. I fluctuated from a sense of wanting more interaction to blissful elation at the production of such exquisite conversations being played out between instruments and lyrics that it was like seeing Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* being blended into Dire Straits back catalogue with mesmerising dexterity.

Although there was something missing in the audience experience, the music being played was astonishingly and refreshingly exhilarating. Dire Straits may have been off stage for a while, but it was also like the audience had been somewhere else too, and although performance hall seating doesn't really help you could feel the desire for something to happen. What did happen was a rather throwaway remark that absolutely captured the moment, maybe driven by a very modern and focussed desire for maximising social media advertising, but it changed the mood in an instant. Alan Clarke said that at their gigs, it was fine for people to take photos and have flash photography, and indeed if people wanted to film some of it and post to YouTube then all the better. One simple reminder that although we were in the Philharmonic, we were at a gig and could loosen up a little.

Years of outside regulation of our lives has left us way too rigid, and on a few occasions in the arena of performance recently there've been moments of kicking against this trend that seem to change the mood quite profoundly with a collective intake of breath ready for something more exciting to happen. Interestingly, from a recent review of a gig at the Phil, Jane Turner noted a similar reaction - see [Echo and the Bunnymen](#). The other moment that stood out like this was at the Royal Exchange's production of [1984](#) where someone smoking a cigarette on stage (one of the few legal exceptions, for artistic purpose), was really quite exhilarating. At first I did think The Phil may not be the best place for a gig, but it's big enough for a popular band, yet intimate enough to feel part of the concert.

By the end, and after people got up and starting dancing or at least shuffling about, there was a palpable sense of loss when the man he steps right up to the microphone, and our Sultans of Swing have to leave - though not until two screamed for encores and nearly two hours of set. The advertising blurb for this gig used a quote from the Daily Express, saying 'The unique sound of classic Dire Straits... from the next best thing'. Time has moved on and this production by The Straits was arguably more innovative and imaginative that the original production, and when the band and audience relax and get into doing it again, they will be a performance to match.