

The Arts

Freaky but unique — do believe the hype

POP

Yeah Yeah Yeahs

Astoria

David Smyth

AT the most fashionable gig of the year so far, the main trend seemed to be having as few musicians on stage as possible.

In support of New York's unspeakably hip Yeah Yeah Yeahs, first came Har Mar Superstar, a fat lone wolf who is certainly a few guitars short of the full group. Singing and rapping over a synth pop backing tape, he displayed entirely unjustified self-love while gradually removing most of his clothes. Next, please.

Then came the Kills, a boy-girl duo with just one guitar and a drum machine between them. Their sparse, harsh, blues rock was primitive but affecting, and in singer VV (even the names are minimal) they have something of a washed-out star.

The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, like fellow back-to-basics advocates the White Stripes, have dispensed with the services of a bassist. On stage at the beginning was drummer Brian Chase and guitarist Nick Zinner, with singer Karen O initially just a cigarette glow in the darkness.

When she finally emerged, theatrically waving a bottle of champagne, it became obvious why, for the last year or more, this band have been at the

centre of a quite extraordinary music industry fuss. The word charismatic doesn't do her justice. She sings in a powerful, sexually charged howl, spinning around the stage and throwing drink over herself. She dresses as if she has rolled naked around a wardrobe and emerged wearing whatever stuck. She makes soft rock, faux-angst fakers like Pink and Avril Lavigne look like meek housewives.

As amazing as anything is the fact that this band managed to sell out a mid-size venue like the Astoria, having only released two singles. Plenty of unfamiliar tracks from the debut album, due at the end of April, sounded promising, some occasionally adding cyclical synth lines to Chase and Zinner's skillful bludgeoning.

There were touches of early Eighties punk-funk, twisted garage rock, and in the case of the uniquely strange Art Star, both cartoon doo-wop and terrifying thrash metal. Cheers greeted that first single, stuttering monster Bang, and O got very excited about playing one new one, a slow-building love song entitled Maps.

The Yeah Yeah Yeahs still sound too extreme to befriend the charts, but they definitely look and sound like the kind of band who will inspire kids to pick up guitars and start bands of their own. Are they worthy of the hype? Yes, yes, yes.



Sexually charged: Karen O makes soft rock, faux-angst fakers like Pink and Avril Lavigne look like meek housewives

These guys are one tough act to follow

JAZZ

Roy Ayers' Ubiquity

Ronnie Scott's

Jack Massarik

JAZZ musicians are a resourceful bunch, and they need to be. Always low on job security, their careers must now survive a phase of politically encouraged terror-paranoia, during which music-lovers shun city centres after working hours. Delegates who braved the recent jazz educators' conference in Toronto were entertained by the CIA (Creative Improvisers' Assembly) and its Musics of Mass Deconstruction. And here, even the crowd-pleasing Roy Ayers has tightened his belt a notch or two.

Back for a three-week residency, whose very length is testament to his popularity, the Los Angeles vibraphonist and singer has trimmed his group to a quintet. Keyboarder Clay Kopas has gone, so alto-saxman Ray Gaskins job-shares more on electric piano. Thanks to some new software, meanwhile, Ayers can transform his tonebars into a string-synth at the flick of a switch, a dab of the mallets releasing warm chord shapes behind Gaskins's preachy saxophone solos.

Fender-bassman Dean Mark has also gone, reportedly tempted to the States by Craig David, but his replacement — "Derek McIntyre from downtown Harrow," as Roy introduced him — is ideal. He and super-crisp drummer Dennis Davis were the unsung heroes last night as Ayers and Gaskins reprised the band's biggest hits.

Searchin', Runnin' Away, Evolution and (inevitably) Everybody Loves the Sunshine were all given extended workouts, with Roy and Ray demanding, and getting, audience call-and-response vocals along the way. An ingenious new number, Every Time, drew tremendous solos from both. Rock-tinged guitarist Tony Smith — "originally from Ontario, Canada, now residing in Muswell Hill" — had some meaty moments, too, but the main focus was on the frontliners, whose needling rivalry enlivens every show.

Ray upstaged Roy with a simultaneous keyboard-and-alto passage, a brilliant feat not seen since the crazy days of Graham Bond. Roy, ever the showman, then steered the number to a close, choreographing the finish with a mallet spun high into the air and caught precisely on the final beat. Tenorist Stan Robinson's quartet seemed pallid after all this, and that's unfair. They're actually very good. It's just that Ubiquity is one tough act to follow.

● Until 15 March. Box office: 020 7439 0747.

Photography as consuming passion

DESPITE the fact that his career only got going in the mid-Eighties, that he is not yet 50 and that he produces very few pictures each year, German photographer Andreas Gursky has for some time been regarded as one of the grand masters of contemporary art. His status was confirmed by a recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the ultimate seal of approval, which has translated into headline-grabbing auction prices. One photograph, a 15ft print of a display cabinet of training shoes, sold for £432,750 last year, making it the world's most expensive contemporary photograph.

EXHIBITION

Andreas Gursky

Inside the White Cube, N1

Nick Hackworth

Happily, behind the hype lies work that is often both beautiful and original. All of it is motivated by the desire to capture the essence of the contemporary world in visual form. This he achieves, in his best work, by taking detailed shots of complex subjects, such as crowds, from a great distance, while focusing on colour

and composition, and presenting the final images in monumental size, as if they were history paintings of old. In them, humans lose their individuality and greater patterns are revealed.

At Inside the White Cube, the small project space that opened above the main Hoxton Square gallery at the end of last year, Gursky shows three images. Greeley, the sole new work, is the first that he has taken from a helicopter. It depicts an alien landscape filled with a vast grid of cattle pens. Innumerable cows go about their business, those in the distance becoming mere dots of colour. The image is large and one

can delve into it, absorbing the detail, but though it is arresting, it is oddly raw and empty in comparison with Gursky's other work. His diptych is more accomplished. Shot in an American 99-cent store, it shows aisle upon aisle of densely packed and brightly coloured products that weigh down the spectator's eye. The few humans present are lost in the almost abstract landscape of consumption, just as lost as the dumb cows, future objects of consumption, in their own strange landscape.

● Until 29 March. Information: 020 7930 5373.