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## Devon Sproule - Live at the Arlington Arts Centre By David Honigmann

Devon Sproule's eccentric British tour brought her to a shiny new concert hall situated in a residential school for the deaf in the West Berkshire badlands. "It's nice to be here," she said, half-certainly. "I didn't know here was here. It's smaller than the town I live in. More people know our Arlington [the Virginia military cemetery] than y'all's."



The tour coincides with the release of Sproule's new album, *I Love You, Go Easy*, putting her in the position of playing a set of universally excellent songs, nearly all of them unfamiliar to the audience.

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Her British band toughened up her material. On record "Now's The Time" is as cajoling as being awakened from sleep by a kiss; here, with the hard snap of Euan Roger's drums, it was more like a fire alarm. "One Eye Open", a two-step swamp-rock pre-murder ballad, written by Sproule's friend Megan Huddleston, was delivered with a grimace and a curdled half-yodel as the chorus broke. The forlorn but hyperliterate "I've Been Destroyed", by her Tin Angel label mate Mantler, shook off its stop-start chamber arrangement for an insistent echoing bass beat from Joe Carvell, and a tumbling rap from Sproule. Starting her own "Unmarked Animals", a meditation on grief and missed opportunity, she coaxed guitarist Andy Whitehead into a dragging slow tempo, turning funk into something more menacing.

From her ancient guitar, Sproule produced everything from a claustrophobic, narcotic haze on Anais Mitchell's "Flowers" to a gently loving waltz on "The Faulty Body", with

Whitehead striking plangent xylophone chords. On “If I Can Do This”, she was her own, impressionistic clarinetist; she struggled through the odd squawk of feedback, mirroring the song’s rising above adversity.

There was a brief break for Mason Lelong, who had been harmonising with three fingers wrapped around a beer bottle, to preview a song by his and Carvell’s band Don’t Move. “Love Me (If There’s One Thing You Ever Do)” was warped power-pop, xylophone chattering and Sproule jumping around like a pixie. The mood stayed upbeat for her own “Monk/Monkey”.

For the final encore, the whole band sang “Ain’t That The Way”, a jaunty road trip, ending up as a cappella off-mike round, all enthusiastically mirroring the words in sign language. If the many dates ahead on this tour are all like this one, tiny isolated communities across Europe are in for a treat.