

THE SCOTSMAN

The Scotsman, 21 August 2001 FESTIVAL TUESDAY 9

Fringe music

Hip Harp Fantasies

★★★★☆

The Scotsman Assembly (venue 3)

OVER the top? Well, yes, but why be anything else when you're dressed in a mini-skirt, sparkly strapless top and cowboy boots, and you swan on stage looking like the prow of a ship, strapped to a glittering, blue harp that can make you sound like Jimi Hendrix?

Deborah Henson-Conant will tell you, in one of her zany home-spun monologues, that when she was a kid, having been smitten with the sound of a blues harmonica player, she asked her parents for a "blues harp". They misunderstood. Which is why this sassy dame can make her harp howl like a tortured Stratocaster, or strum out

Mexican cantina music, or swing like Brubeck, or accompany herself in some occasionally quite bizarre songs about trees called Belinda, or neighbourhood dogs that make like the Blues Brothers.

Henson-Conant has visited Edinburgh before, as jazz harpist, but this, her first visit to the Fringe, is a one-woman extravaganza that combines review with cabaret with playing... well, actually, playing, slapping, pummelling and waltzing with the electronic Clarsach, which has enabled her to step out from behind the big unwieldy concert harp.

And boy, does she step out, all breathy reminiscence one minute, gentle nocturnal murmurs from the harp, then a shake of those cascading rainbow hair-



LEFT: Deborah Henson-Conant plays the blues on her (rather unusual) harp. Picture: Neil Hanna

braids and that soaringly powerful voice lets rip.

I would have relished more of her formidably agile playing, rather than some of her more indulgent excursions into kookydom. It seemed churlish to even consider this, however, as the

audience laughed, got to their feet and cheered, or simply sat open mouthed, as she gave us the blues, on a blue harp - plucked, not blown, but fired up with soul nonetheless.

Jim Gilchrist

Until 27 August

FREE METRO

Tuesday, August 21, 2001 15

Edinburgh Festival
fringe
www.edfringe.com

Deborah Henson-Conant performed her one-woman show "Hip Harp Fantasies" from August 3 - August 27, 2001 at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Assembly Rooms Venue)

MUSIC REVIEW

hip harp fantasies

★★★★☆

Today until Mon, Assembly Rooms, George Street, Edinburgh, Venue 3, 1.15pm, £9 to £10, £8 to £9 concs. Tel: 0131 226 2428

The prissy drawing-room image once widely associated with the harp has been under sustained assault for some time, what with a battalion of younger Celtic players taking the instrument to new, fusion-inclined dimensions, and the world music scene's discovery of many other rich harping traditions, from Africa to Latin America. Few have blown the cobwebs off harp music quite so comprehensively, however, as California's Deborah Henson-Conant (below). Wielding a bright blue, custom-designed electric small harp

(ie, the Celtic rather than the big pedalled classical variety), fitted with a pick-up on every string and an array of digital effects, she wears it strapped on à la Stratocaster, also sporting a head-mike and thus replacing the sedentary stillness enforced on most harpists with plenty of dynamic movement. Her appearance, too, goes head-to-head with convention



- skimpy black halter top, mini-skirt, cowboy boots, colourfully beribboned dreadlocks - but it's her dazzling range and depth of technique, combined with a warmly engaging, energetic stage manner, that ultimately makes this such a memorable show.

Effortlessly traversing genre boundaries from blues to folk, jazz to world music, she's conjuring the entire sound of a traditional Mexican street band one minute, laying into a ferocious Hendrix-inspired rock workout the next, all with equally unerring flair and finesse, while her bright-toned, muscular singing proves equally adept at switching between styles.

As she weaves one number into the next via whimsical tales of her childhood and snippets of ancient harp lore, you soon see why the Boston Globe couldn't decide whether to send a drama or a music critic to review her show - they ended up sending both. SW