

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Womadelaide 2001

Botanic Park

Womadelaide Mark Six has come and gone and its remarkable continuity is again assured. The key to its success is clear. It is well-funded, well managed and has a modus operandi that not only works but is shared by the up-to-25,000 crowd that fills Botanic Park at its peak attendance. Few outdoor festivals enjoy the support that Womad has - from Government departments, quangos, NGOs, arts organisations, Botanic gardeners, St John, the police, caterers and stall holders, all the many contributors to its organisation.

And the nurturing is well-placed. For a fraction of the cost of a car race, even an obscure American franchised car race, Womadelaide is one of the few ongoing ventures that the Festival Centre Trust can be proud of. It grew out of the 1992 Adelaide Festival and enjoyed its patronage at a very critical R and D stage. If it had been a stand alone, break-even venture first, or even second, time round, it would have folded before it could prove itself. Now, it is a unique summer event, and one that is tailor-made to its Adelaide location. There is a lesson here, in patience and longer-term return.

Arts Projects Australia - comprised of former senior executives of the AFCT - continues to manage and sustain Womadelaide. The connections Rob Brookman first forged with Thomas Brooman of Womad UK have consolidated to the point where the Adelaide event is now what benchmarkers might call world music best practice. That continues in 2001 with director Ian Scobie, the dedicated commitment from Festival Trust staff and skilled production contractors such as Geoff Cobham and David Arbon.

The buzz for this year's event has been better than ever. Organisers report brisker pre-weekend sales and closed the gates on a 25,000 plus crowd on Saturday night. Even with 39 degree heat on the Sunday the total attendances for the weekend reach 67,000. Attracting numbers like that while maintaining passenger comfort is a real achievement. It is also helped by the fact that the Womad crowd is the most benign collection of citizens. They don't all have to be in the front row, they don't drink themselves insensible in the hot sun. They sometimes have unrealistic hopes that audi-

ences should remain seated during performances, but they also have a creditably diverse and tolerant notion of what constitutes a good time.

So, enough about infrastructure, arts politics and the well-trained punters, what about the music? Six events in nearly ten years have dug deep into the global entertainment market and the first several Womads set the bar very high. This year with some 400 artists and seven stages in operation the program is both rich, various and variable. Many acts are excellent, some ho-hum, some are clunkers and some exquisite surprises.

First on the program, Irish rhythm and whistle band Flook! open at Stage Three. A good sized crowd is already stretched out on the grass. Walking through the park from Frome Road we have noted that the vendors' stalls have been moved further north and the food tents have been given more ample space. Stage Four is closer by, but the overall configuration is immediately, reassuringly recognisable. Flook! musicians Sarah Allen and Brian Finnegan are fluting their way through a *Sligo Reel*, with Ed Boyd on guitar and John Joe Kelly pattering the bodhran. Someone picks up an accordion for the slower paced *Gentle Giant*, dedicated to a Macedonian musician friend, and the tempo changes again for *E-flat Reels*. It is low-key and friendly, a nice hors d'oeuvre before the main stage begins.

Following the Kaurna welcome at Stage One, the ASO are back in good-natured strength, this time as backing band to French violinist Gilles Apap. An energetic performer he rolls back the sleeves of his hippie tunic and scrapes his way through some Django Reinhardt followed by Mozart as Mozart, Mozart from the Ozarks and Mozart as gypsy Hungarian. The ASO are good sports, it's hardly a good showcase for their capacities and signals, perhaps, that the orchestra spot at Womad needs more careful thought.

Pato Banton, the Birmingham based musician, leads his Reggae Revolution through a disappointing set - for those hoping for some dinkum reggae, that is. His songs promise *Positive Vibrations* but the preachiness is more like Sunday School. In their white gear the band looks flash enough but James Renford, lively though he is on saxophone, does not make up for the lacklustre lyrics and stodgy drum and bass. After some turgidly worthy Pato originals, the Bob Marley cover, *Jamming*, is a pleasing variation, as is

the Rascals hit *Groovin'*. But, despite the crowd's undoubted enthusiasm, I am left thinking that we *still* haven't seen a reggae act at Womadelaide.

American musician Bob Brozman specialises in National Resonator instruments, art deco beauties from the 1930s, they are the Airstream trailers of the guitar world. He is a brilliant player using strong percussive additions to his bottleneck and lap-style playing. He visits blues, ragtime, Hawaiian slack key, songs from the Bahamas, tunes on custom long neck guitar and custom short neck guitar. He also wields a twelve string Bolivian chirango. Brozman is a hypermanic wizard and when he calls for us to join in with the calypso *Uncle Joe* only the contrapunters among us dare try.

Saturday begins for me with Jimmy Little, in his burgundy blazer in the mid afternoon heat. Backed by Brendan Gallagher's Karma County Jimmy delivers eight or so selections from the *Messenger* CD including *Cattle and Cane* and Ed Kuepper's *The Way I Made You Feel*. The singer takes a fall during the first song, *Under the Milky Way*, and we have our concerns for him for a minute there. But he braves the heat, and the shock, to ring a telephone to glory and breathe new life into the Roy Orbison hit *Crying*.

Malian singer Rokia Traore performs two lovely sets accompanied by her guitar and the distinctive n'goni, banjo-like instruments playing syncopated notes against her sweetly resonant vocal and the harmonies of Xenia Caraibe and Cotinne Thuy Thy. She sings selections from her recent *Wanita* CD, including *Kana Neni*, a song of gratitude and *Souba*, a hymn to community respect. Rokia Traore will be a welcome inclusion in any future Womad event.

The return of Richard Thompson, veteran British songwriter and virtuoso guitarist is similarly auspicious. Playing superbly on both occasions he covers material from the early 70s through to his recent *Mock Tudor* CD. From the latter comes *Bathsheba Smiles* and *Cooksferry Queen* but diehards grow misty-eyed at such gems from the back catalogue as *The Great Valero*, *Vincent* and *When the Spell is Broken*. He even recalls, from *Amnesia*, *Waltzin's For Dreamers* and, provides a memorable Stage Three twilight encore with *The Dimming of the Day*. Thompson's songs are often melancholy, with a sardonic edge - ballads in plain D with a haunting tenor and a brilliantly apt guitar.

Another Saturday night highlight is the Afro Celt Sound System who have developed their 1996 stage performance, full of hesitant concern for the technical intricacies of their live, tape mix sound into an impressively fluid mix of music and dance almost reminiscent of the Prodigy at their raging best. Simon Emmerson is still the MC of the event, setting up beats from his keyboard while various other Celts enter fugue-like into the blend. James McNally adds heavily miked up bodhran along with flute and whistle, Iarla O Lionaird, his long hair cropped this time, delivers his rather self-consciously angelic vocal, Emer Mayock sits at the back of the stage pumping up a storm from her uilleann pipes.

Then there's the Afro section - drummers N'Faly Kouyate, Moussa Sissokho and Arivinderpal Kalsi - on a variety of talking, dhol and balafon drums. The band weaves an extended selection from their second CD *Release*, but it is the signature material from their best-selling debut album which really hits the pedal - *Whirl-Y-Reel* mixes 1 and 2 - with the rippling, twanging drums, wood flutes and jiggling pipes forming an irresistible intercontinental techno ceilidh which has the night crowd bopping nearly as energetically as the onstage dancers.

The inevitable program clashes mean missing Carlos Nunez for Bob Brozman but my glimpse of the Galician bagpiper on the Sunday leaves me unrepentant, especially as Armenian duduk player Djivan Gasparyan is playing an extraordinary set at Stage Four. The eerie, vibrato sounds from this little apricot wood flute are almost indescribable. Accompanied by two other duduks, one regular, one bass, the drone sound is as haunting as it is apparently simple. Gasparyan has played with a range of Western musicians including Womad founder Peter Gabriel. His CD, produced by Nusrat collaborator Michael Brook, is called *Moon Shines at Night*. Some Womad CD purchases prove not to be durable after the event. This wonderful recording is not one of them.

Other performers of note include the long-standing ambassadors for Cuban music, Sierra Maestra whose second set is particularly fine, John Butler, who, despite some heavy influences from Ben Harper and Eddie Vedder, is nonetheless an exciting talent on twelve string guitar, and the Chemrami Zarb Trio. They play a mesmeric form of Iranian drum which is sufficiently beguiling for me to stay at Stage Seven at midnight when I had

fully intended to hear the equally accomplished flute recital from Dr Natesan Ramani.

The cancellation of Nigerian Afrobeat star Femi Kuti is a major disappointment. And despite his valiant arrival, at late notice, Papa Wemba's replacement performance is insufficient consolation. The Paris-based singer is as dapper as ever but the set is haughtily offhand. He has been quoted as saying that he prefers African audiences because they understand what he is singing about. Well, yes. But at Womad there are plenty of translators on hand, especially French speakers, and Papa Wemba could have reached out more than this.

In contrast is Zimbabwean singer Oliver Mtukudzi and The Black Spirits whose performance on Sunday night is the essence of Southern African music - expressively grainy vocals, intricate cross rhythms, and nimbly playful guitar sounds. His *tuku* music, sung in the Shona dialect, covers a range of issues from the value of tradition in Dzoka Uyamwe to the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic in Mabasa, a song he dedicates to his late brother.

As in previous years, this Womadelaide demonstrates that the event is greater than the sum of its programs. Its broad audience appeal, the parkland ambience and the consistently high production values make it an event which continues to justify its ticket price - just under five dollars an hour is good value in anybody's language. But the program is less even this time and the Femi Kuti cancellation is not only a disappointment but maybe a sign of things to come. There is serious talk of the event becoming an annual one. That sounds terrific, of course, but I wonder if the audience will return as faithfully when it means Adelaide Festival dollars will be fewer and there is, perhaps, less depth in the batting. The organisers have a hard-won reputation to protect here - and what will it profit any of us if Womad were to try to gain more of the world music market only to lose its soul?