



Music

Newport festival is hot

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, August 5, 2007

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Drummer Matt Burr of Grace Potter and the Nocturnals improvises with a guitar case during a pick-up session at the Gibson open mike tent yesterday at the Dunkin' Donuts Newport Folk Festival at Fort Adams State Park.

the providence journal / John Freidah John Freidah

NEWPORT — There's nothing like the real thing.

Yesterday was hippie-rock day at the Dunkin' Donuts Newport Folk Festival, and while bands such as Assembly of Dust, The John Butler Trio and The North Mississippi All-Stars all had their strong points, when their spiritual forefathers The Allman Brothers Band came on to close the show at Fort Adams it was like a genetic study revealing where the younger bands' mix of shaggy, danceable rock and free-form innovation came from.

In a two-hour-plus show that threw together hits "Midnight Rider," "Melissa" and "Revival" with a rendition of "Leave My Blues at Home" that included a 10-minute, four-way percussion jam and a 14-minute "Mountain Jam," the band claimed equal billing with The Grateful Dead in the history of where jam-rock began and in the same breath showed the origins of Southern rock. (The guest appearance of North Mississippi All-Stars guitarist Luther Dickinson on "The Weight," trading slide solos with Trucks, helped seal the generational deal.)

Organist and singer Gregg Allman looked every one of his 59 years but still had the voice that almost single-handedly created Southern rock. Guitarists Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks traded solos and slide fills that carried songs along, as well as harmonized riffs (such as on "Mountain Jam"). Bassist Oteil Burbridge filled

out most with complex runs but kept a funky bubble, turning languid on “Melissa.” Drummers Butch Trucks and Jaimoe, along with percussionist Marc Quinones, worked hard in the engine room. Even the dedicated audience, announced at 7,800, was wrung dry.

Butler’s all-acoustic group combined a reggae-esque lilt with a hippie-esque lyrical flow, but really caught fire during the solos. Butler combined lickety-split strumming and hammer-ons with drum-machine-like thumping on his acoustic guitar, and when he hit harder, the sound devolved into a distorted murk from which wonderfully horrific dissonances flowed. (Whether those in the assembled crowd were able, with their minds, to bring an end to the Iraq occupation by praying during the solo, as Butler asked, remains to be seen.) Bassist Shannon Birchall, supplementing with a harmonizer on his acoustic bass, and drummer Michael Barker were agile and energetic.

Of the early performances, Grace Potter and the Nocturnals were a hit, with a modern singer-songwriter rock feel led by Potter’s vocals and plenty of guitar from Potter and Scott Tourner. The Dirty Dozen Brass Band kicked off the main stage with a trademark blend of New Orleans second-line music, funky yet happy, with a kicking sousaphone.

However, two of the best performers of the day were solo acoustic singer-songwriters on the second stage.

Martha Wainwright was an iron woman, playing a long set of her own and then joining a song circle with her half-sister, Lucy Wainwright Roche, and her aunt, Sloan Wainwright. Martha Wainwright’s voice is a tunefully braying, keening wonder, not unlike her brother Rufus Wainwright. Her songs are full of acute psychological detail; their somber tone brought the feel of a rainy dusk to the blazing afternoon. Her good humor belied lyrics such as “There are days when the cage doesn’t open very wide at all.” Her forthcoming record, she promised, would be “no less happy than the last one. And no more. It’s the same.” Later, she said, “I’m very concerned about the woe-is-me aspect of my songwriting,” but added that “I try to end on an up note.” Ultimately, she said, “I’m inspired to write songs when something’s disturbing me.”

Sloan Wainwright brought a big, earnest voice to her songs in the circle, including covers of “Mercy Mercy Me” and “Ring of Fire,” while Lucy Wainwright Roche was sweet-sounding on songs such as her own “I’d Rather Go” and the traditional ballad “Wild Mountain Thyme.”

The Nightwatchman, also known as Tom Morello, guitarist of Rage Against the Machine and Audioslave, brought the overflow second-stage crowd to a peak with a solo acoustic set of uncompromisingly political material calling for a “One Man Revolution,” the title of his opening song.

“This is kind of like Dylan in reverse,” he said from the stage, referring to his going acoustic in contrast to his better-known rock work. From the shouted “For the union men and women — stand up and stand strong” in “Union Song” to the sinister la-las in “Midnight in the City of Destruction,” a song about post-Katrina New Orleans, he put across his strident point of view with an unceasing frankness that was at first unnerving, then enthralling. He prefaced his closing version of “This Land Is Your Land” by telling the crowd that “History is not in the hands of presidents or popes ... billionaires or bankers. The wheel of history is in our hands,” and got almost the entire crowd, of widely varying ages, to leap in time during the final chorus.

At a news conference afterward, Morello said he grew up in Illinois and soon learned “to trust [Clash frontman] Joe Strummer more than Tom Brokaw.” While Rage and Audioslave have leftist credentials, he said his Nightwatchman project is “doing music for the right reasons.” He started his solo career by playing at coffeehouse open mikes in Los Angeles, and has since moved to union rallies and the like.

Asked whether he’s reaching the kind of audience that needs to hear his message, he said, “I’m unapologetically preaching to the converted, because the converted need a kick in the [expletive].”

The third stage was once again primarily dedicated to traditional music from the East Coast of Canada. Vishten combined piano, fiddle and accordion with step-dancing percussion in a spirited mix, and The MacKenzie Project, including former members of The Cottars, made a similar mix. A beautiful fiddle introduction by Roseanne MacKenzie was marred by motorcyclists arriving for The Allman Brothers, but that’s a festival for you.

Alcohol sales, a first at Fort Adams, and reserved seating, a folk-festival first, seemed to enjoy smooth debuts.

There were grumblings about the reserved seating, which took up a prime area of the field in front of the stage — a cardboard sign had four protesting messages on it — but the seats looked full by the time The Allman Brothers came on.

People were waiting in line to enter the beer tent at the end of the pier before it opened at 1 p.m., and by 4 people were speaking of 45-minute waits to have identification checked and get into the area. Drinkers were far from the main stage and could not leave the designated area with alcohol; the tent closed at 6 (90 minutes before the end of the show) and there were no apparent problems.

The heat was at times oppressive, but in late afternoon Dr. Geno Martinez at the first-aid tent reported that there were no cases of heat exhaustion, even though he had feared that alcohol would increase the risks. “People are wearing hats and keeping hydrated,” he said.

The festival concludes today at Fort Adams.

Concert

Review

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