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LIVE EYE

Carla Bozulich braved the rain at the Eclectic Electrics Festival

Electric Eclectics Festival @ The Funny Farm, Meaford, Ontario, July 31-Aug. 2

BY JONNY DOVERCOURT August 04, 2009 13:08

If your average summer-music festival experience is something of a corporate concentration camp, then [Electric Eclectics](#) is more like an artistic refugee camp. This “festival of experimental music and sound art” in Meaford, Ontario — a Georgian Bay town of 10,000, just over two hours northwest of Toronto — has yet to explode in popularity the way other community-minded outdoor festivals such as Guelph’s [Hillside](#) have, and for now that is a wonderful thing. An intimate crowd of under 300 attended this fourth installment of the festival. Small-is-beautiful allows for a lot of things bigger fests have lost: a neighbourly sense of solidarity with your fellow festival-goer, a chance to get up close and personal with the bands, and (hallelujah!) no line-ups for the bathroom.

Yet it’s the location that makes Electric Eclectics so blissfully fantastic. The “Funny Farm” — a converted farmhouse property owned by festival director and musician Gordon Monahan and his partner, visual artist Laura Kikauka — is located on rolling countryside south of downtown Meaford, and the stage faces the most beautiful sunset in Ontario. As with Hillside, the real way to do EE is to go camping, and the Funny Farm field offers plenty of space to set up your tent, and with just a short walk from campground to bandstand, the show is always within earshot. Sound installations sprout up all around: in transport trailers, grain silos and on bikes. There is always something to distract you, and always someone to talk to. This is the kind of festival where strangers say “hey man” as you’re on your way to the chip truck for poutine.

But this rustic Art-stock vibe threatens to overshadow the music. Programmers Monahan and Chris Worden have struck a fine balance between more traditionally “serious” experimental music and the more light-hearted yet equally innovative work coming out of “indie” spheres.

Living up to its name, the festival offered a mind-bogglingly diverse line-up. Friday night was warmed up by whimsically heartfelt Guelph indie-folk ukulelist [Sarah Mangle](#), followed by Brooklyn composer [Lukas Ligeti](#), who came armed with a marimba lumina (a rare MIDI controller designed by Don Buchla) upon which he performed his hypnotic, African-influenced minimalism. Fans of jarring mood shifts might have been disappointed by the weak sound for [I Can Put My Arm Back On You Can’t](#) — the T.O. math-punk trio’s punishing intensity was diminished, but far from extinguished. Last up, a revelation: [Katie Stelmanis](#) displayed how her two months touring Europe with percussionist/vocalist Maya Postepski have paid off, as the duo played a near-perfect and inspiring set to end the evening.

Saturday offered some of the weekend’s most challenging programming — and situations. Munich

duo [Kunst Oder Unfall](#) combined text, toys and abstract yet pulsing electronica; Brooklyn multi-media artist [Amelia Saul](#) sang otherworldly torch songs written that week with hosts Worden and Monahan; and Romania's [Yvat](#) played downtempo IDM accompanied by post-rock marimba.

As night fell, the wind began to whip up, which added suitable gravitas to a darkly minimal set by L.A. singer/guitarist [Carla Bozulich](#), joined only by an electric bassist. The rain started to fall as a special guest joined the stage: vocalist [Damo Suzuki of Can fame](#). As it began to pour, the audience fled for cover while organizers scrambled for tarps. Yet it was only a short delay before Suzuki took the stage for his own set, backed up by the EE house band. A spirited set of improv-rock indeed, though one wished for a more Can-tastic rhythmic push. And that was provided by 2008 Polaris Prize short-listers [Holy Fuck](#), whose fantastic set — following another rain delay — packed a wallop, and made the crowd dance away their soggy blues.

The fact that band as popular as Holy Fuck can headline a small experimental music festival in rural Ontario — and it worked — testifies not only to the organizers' vision, but the embracing open-minded-ness of the audience. Electric Eclectics is a gathering of lost and scattered tribes: folk-festival lifers and industrial-music bald-heads; hippie fire-twirlers and video art nerds, indie-rock kids and their older siblings who brought their actual kids. Like the line-up itself, planting all this diversity in the middle of a field party makes being a fringe-dwelling social outcast seem like the most normal thing in the world.

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