

## Electric Eclectics Festival Funny Farm, Meaford ON August 4 to 6

Forest raves, drone therapy and noise made for three sleepless but exciting and dramatic nights at this acclaimed avant-garde experimental music festival.

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Pull off Scotch Mountain Road onto the winding drive up to Laura Kikauka and Gordon Monahan's affectionately dubbed "Funny Farm" in rural Meaford, ON, and you'll find an art-bombed playground for the senses. From overgrown weeds and bushes, Kikauka's kitschy, abstract mannequin sculptures greet you around every turn, while epic sunsets drop down the Big Head Valley and wash your world electric pink and orange — an idyllic, delightfully surreal environment in constant flux, reaching peak animation every August long weekend for the annual Electric Eclectics Festival.

Like a less rugged Southern Ontario training ground for Burning Man, since Monahan and Chris Worden founded the festival in 2006, EE has attracted an enviable pilgrimage of ravers, noise fans and other proud freaks with an adventurous lineup of avant-garde sound artists, DJs and crossover bands.

That this is all going to be pretty mind-altering is established by the gates, but is cemented with every

visit you pay the stage. On either side, collections of sun-bleached stuffed animals, dolls and other childhood playthings twist up into the clouds like anarchic Baroque totems to impulse, innocence and expressionism, a disparate constellation of costumed misfits and weirdos underneath.

This year, night one has tapped Montreal-via-Hamilton's **YlangYlang** to set it all in motion — drifting landscapes and "pink wave" vocal loops and downtempo beats soundtracking a fast-dropping sun.

The off-balance, contemplative atmosphere permeated by the drones made for a ripe environment for **Platitudes**, seizing the intimate atmosphere to confront the noise of human interaction — Julia Dyck surfing radio waves and spinning bits of language into concrete obscurity while Soft Cone bandmate James Goddard draws up meandering sax lines.

**ANAMAI** chases it with high, new age mindfulness. After marking their EE debut with an opening set at last year's festival, this time, the braintrust between Anna Mayberry (HSY) and David Psutka (Egyptrixx) is shrouded in darkness and storm-bearing chill, augmented by Allie Blumas (Doomsquad) and Emily Ekelund for their *What Mountain* song cycle, breathing subtly warped folk into mountain meditations. Vibes are dark and heavy throughout, but all things pass.

When it's over, **Iskwé** brings a rumbling set of empowering electro-R&B, debuting "Soldier" (promised as a forthcoming single dedicated to the land keepers) amongst a set of stirring anti-colonial anthems. The rainfall comes down in the middle of it all, but they play right through, capping it off with a cover of Björk's "Army of Me."

Like much of the music it involves itself with, Electric Eclectics is an experimental undertaking. In an effort to make EE a place where sound lovers and seekers of all stripes can truly let go of inhibitions and let their freak flags fly, organizers have worked hard to build an infrastructure of positive space initiatives into the bones of the festival, which translates to admirable gender parity (over two thirds of EE's 31 acts contain female identifying performers), active harm reduction outreach with festivalgoers, benefit of the doubt (EE is BYOB) and an explicit social conduct policy borrowed from Toronto's NASA (Noise Against Sexual Assault) safer space community initiative: "No racism. No sexism. No homophobia. No transphobia. No violence (including sexual and emotional violence). No ableism. Yes respect. Yes you."

So when things get weird(er) and go late in DJ Valley, the Funny Farm's generator-supplied forest dance party where DJ sets from **OBUXUM**, **DOOMSQUAD** and **Choozey** bounce woozy beats and alien house off the pines, Vanessa Rieger's there in her role as the Nightlifeguard, scouting about and checking in with partiers, offering water, and policing any creeps to keep things safe and positive.

Things won't get started again until late Saturday afternoon, so campers have plenty of time to manage their hangovers or head into town.

Back on the mainstage, **Kat Estacio** keeps things reflective, pouring windswept, electronically processed kulintang drone over the valley. Brooklyn violinist **Laura Ortman** brings strings fit to fight the elements, and after joining Ortman for a finale sendoff to the late (EE alumnus) Tony Conrad, **MV Carbon** brings her electric cello into more avant-garde contexts, incorporating it into the grinding dissonance of a buzz activated chalice and a reel-to-reel unit she treated like a pair of turntables.

The evening programming flips the inward-looking afternoon on its head, all monumental cathartic release and elemental passion by comparison. The **Pucumber Sasssquash Family Band** brings its spastic hardcore gourd worship; **Persons** chases it with an ecstatic dance party; **Ivory Towers** takes us into Quinne Rodgers haunted pop depictions of violent dreams and ripping King Edward I to ribbons; a revamped **YAMANTAKA // SONIC TITAN** debuts a new, more pointedly metallic sound; and it all peaks when **Tim Hecker** makes a midnight appearance with a colossal skycracker, ear

corroding volume like a middle finger to the wind that rendered any amount of fog juice useless and penetrated the crowd as much as any of his drones could.

When 1mitator hits the stage to get things rolling on Sunday afternoon, harsh landscapes wake even the hardest of last night's partiers. **Deenzi's** more sympathetic, Heidi Chan lulling listeners with flute abstractions before she and Andy Yue build to their own industrial mechanics. The irony of the gothic post-punk triple play that follows is impossible to miss under the clear blue sky: **New Positions** channels bunker-born missives through hellish no wave; **Bonnie Trash** sings of cannibal patriarchs, and **Vallens** gives a new set of shoegaze a dark wash.

It's not until the sun starts setting that things really begin to make sense again; another fiery orb passing into the distance is the perfect cue for **DOOMSQUAD's** David Byrne-infected solar paganism, carrying some of the house influence from their opening night DJ set into the live show and making good on the expectation left behind when their 2015 set got cancelled for a tornado warning.

After the ritual dance off, it's evident many have already left camp, but there's a strong contingent sticking around for one more weird night before the long drive back to reality and they find it — **Meinschaft** is right there, trolling the internet of things and pacing between a pair of portrait bulbs in a mirror mask while memes flash away on a backdrop and singing over harsh noise.

From there, **Witch Prophet's** neo soul spell-casting provides a centering balm, and **Inflatable Deities** play out the festival with an off-kilter, fever pitch performance-meets-dance-meets-video art piece that culminates in — of all things — a karaoke rendition of Sinatra's "New York, New York" that brings the mic into the pit.