



Festival fever hits town and country

CARL WILSON

AUGUST 4, 2006

Oh, summertime music. The top's down on the convertible, there's two girls for every boy, belting out Wild Thing . . . and then a truly wild thing comes snarling out of the dark, gnashing seagulls and puppies to bits with its curled, razor incisors.

That's the image brought to mind by two Ontario events this holiday weekend that winkingly upend the cliché of summer music festivals as mellow endorphin baths of folk, jazz, rock and dance grooves -- and supplant it with a scalding torrent of experimental, feel-bad racket.

In Toronto, the Tranzac Club plays host to the Bummer in the Summer, which presents some four dozen adventurous groups. And in Meaford, Ont., on Georgian Bay, the first annual Electric Eclectics festival brings knotty urban "irritainment" to a bucolic 100-acre farm.

Not that these are gatherings for bathing-suit-hating killjoys. As their names hint, both festivals share an antic playfulness, and take advantage of the leisurely pace of midsummer. They merely say that in the season when the livin' is easy, your listening doesn't have to be.

The Meaford event grows out of an old summer tradition for its organizers, installation artist Laura Kikauka and musician Gordon Monahan. In the late 1980s, they had another property in the area, dubbed the Funny Farm. They would invite their artist friends out for summer parties, which evolved into art/performance jamborees.

"In the last year, 1992, we had over 300 people there camping out," says Monahan. The couple then moved to Berlin for nearly 14 years, where they continued curating events. But when they settled back in Meaford, they decided to formalize the Funny Farm legacy, and sought the funding to start Eclectic Electrics.

The roster features Alexander Hacke, best known as the bassist with the venerable German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten, as well as prominent sound artist Yuko Nexus 6 from Japan and seminal minimalist composer Tony Conrad from the United States. Among the 25 or so performances, an artist named Lary 7 from New York will perform on electrified zither and amplified washing machine.

DJs will spin music between the live acts on the farm, where visitors are invited to set up camp. But happenings occur in the town of Meaford as well, notably at the newly restored opera house; sound art has been installed in local galleries; and participants are doing workshops with town children and teens.

"We're bringing culture up to Meaford that's not what you'd typically get, which is summer theatre or maybe classical chamber music or mainstream stuff," says Monahan. What was conceived as a country getaway for city bohemians has drawn unexpected local enthusiasm, which bodes well for their hopes to make it a yearly thing.

"I go to a lot of festivals," he adds, "and the ones that are really good have lots of stuff tagged on, like DJs and after-parties. You can have your 'serious' concert and then go have some fun."

Or, in the vision of the Bummer in the Summer crew in Toronto, you can have it all at once. The ambitious project was conceived by young performers Matt Dunn and Wolfgang Nessel, and is unique in uniting many aspects of Toronto experimental music, from free jazz and improvisation to electronic noise, surrealistic folk and the artier side of the indie-rock scene.

"To me it's all in the same spirit," says Matt Dunn, "but we wanted to see if the audience is willing to accept it standing side by side."

To that end, Bummer features mostly short sets of under a half-hour, in quick sequence, using the Tranzac's main hall, its front barroom and its outdoor space. "That way," Dunn says, "if you don't like what you're hearing, go get a beer and there'll be something else happening by the time you come back."

In keeping with the air of mystique and misdirection many of the artists cultivate, the Bummer began last night with a clandestine, 2 a.m. concert in Trinity Bellwoods Park. Its above-board program launches tonight, headlined by acclaimed Brooklyn psych-rockers Oneida.

The music continues from early afternoon to midnight tomorrow and Sunday, with anticipated highlights including arch musical provocateur John Oswald performing with New York's Andy Haas (a Toronto expat in the NYC scene associated with John Zorn), rising young songwriter and kalimba player Laura Barrett, Vermont "frontier folk" cultists MV & EE (linked to the critically praised group Tower Recordings) and mainstay local adventurers such as Polmo Polpo and Deep Dark United -- among multitudes.

But both events mainly promise the unpredictable. And at the very least, there are now two summer festivals you can attend without fear of hearing a Bob Marley cover.

Electric Eclectics runs today through Sunday. Passes begin at \$30. <http://www.electric-eclectics.com>