



A Reason to Live: Electric Eclectics

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It's not quite the full-on woodland blowout it could be, nor quite the cerebral gathering of erudite, chin-scratching weirdos into which it occasionally lulls.

No, the Electric Eclectics festival – which descended upon a spectacular piece of property sloping magnificently into Beaver Valley just below the bucolic Georgian Bay community of Meaford for three days this past weekend – occupies a peculiar position somewhere in between. The event's uncertainty of character and general, programmatic randomness, however, were what lent this year's sixth edition of E.E. much of its homespun charm.

From what I've discerned from my first trip to the fest, Electric Eclectics is less concerned with supplying a bang-bang-bang parade of main-stage acts than it is with cultivating the genial, overall "hang" that can ensue when a few hundred music geeks at the geekiest end of the music-geek spectrum are planted together amidst the surreal, quasi-natural landscape manufactured when a large swath of central-Ontario farmland is bombarded by random avant-garde sounds for 72 hours. There were a handful of agreed-upon "must sees" who drew the wallflowers out of their tents over the two days that I attended – Vancouver digi-punk banshees MYTHS on the Saturday, for instance, and Berlin-based promoter-turned-historian Danielle De Picciotto reading from her proto-rave-era memoirs to electronic accompaniment by Einsturzende Neubaten's Alexander Hacke on Sunday night – but often a quick trip to the stage to put a face or two on the humans hiding behind the latest hodgepodge of stacked gear and strewn cables was enough; the music tended to be formless, not particularly performance-oriented and well suited to simply soundtracking one's idle stares into a mesmerizing rural vista whose long-held sunsets only gave way to even more eye-popping Milky Way cascades. The land was the star of the show, the various musicians and art installations and jabbering, skull-shaped robots running amok across the hillside merely its accessories.

Nifty accessories, though. A healthy turnout materialized on Saturday night for a scattered, Beat-poetic jam between London, Ont.'s stridently-keepin'-it-real-for-45-years improvisational ensemble the Nihilist Spasm Band and Neubaten's Hacke, then drifted together in the angelic, unfailingly pretty-but-predictable headspaces conjured by one-woman Brooklyn chorale Julianna Barwick. Then MYTHS stormed onstage and shot a bolt of assaultive, Goth-industrial terror down the meadow. Fancifully costumed principles Lief Hall and Quinne Rodgers spewed bestial mutant-rap rants and processed shrieks over hammering-hard rhythm tracks worthy of Atari Teenage Riot with a self-assured, rock-stardom-worthy vigour that buried everyone around them; they were easily the highlight of the weekend.

The Saturday after-hours portion of the festival was less successful, albeit through no fault of its programming. Versatile Guelph DJ part/parcel proved a deft party starter down in the dank nook dubbed "the Valley of the DJs" with a brisk barrage of skillfully sequenced electro-pop bangers that

had a full complement of stylish Crystal Castles disciples dancing on all sides. But when she ceded the booth to Tom Kuo – Toronto’s best techno DJ, for my money – at least a third of the audience for the DJ tent erupted in insurrection, flooding the dancefloor with balloons and heckling the headliner in the most egregious display of childish petulance I’ve ever witnessed at a supposedly open-minded and inclusive festival. Kuo killed it for the love of the game, at least, once a good chunk of his audience had angrily taken off uphill, discharging fireworks in its wake; the enthusiastic crew of dancers who stuck around until the first whiff of sunlight wound up clenched tight into a set that got so ridiculously dry, rigid and complicated towards the end that he broke the mixer.

Sunday was another mixed-bag blur. I kinda dug Owen Sound duo Okee because they looked all of 14 years old yet delivered their off-key, “folktronic” ditties with a stoned diffidence that suggested a profound schooling in Neil Young and Stephen Malkmus. Love Parade co-founder De Picciotto’s “storytime for ageing ravers” shtick made for a lovely scene, with dozens of festivalgoers sitting cross-legged on the grass beneath the stars attentively taking in her tales of illegal parties and run-ins with the Berlin police. U.S. Girls didn’t do much to dash my suspicions that any cute girl with a few electronic doodads at her disposal could score a headlining gig at a festival thronged by so many awkward boys, but the one-woman band did crank some impressively gnarled and mangled anti-pop ugliness through the P.A. before the main stage shut down for good.

The dance tent never really got going at all on Sunday, as most of the partying shifted to the ludicrously kitsch-covered backstage area – part of the arty “Funny Farm” complex that calls the festival site home. Just as well, too, because the DJ down there, a unsubtle chap named PROFIT, was godawful. The wee hours thus became time to take in a few of the installations one last time (Willy LeMaitre’s creepy 3D loop “Outlook Expressed” was my favourite) and, more importantly, soak up as much of the stars as one could before returning to the city in the morning.

Electric Eclectics, yes! Absolute chaos with good food, to boot. I’ll go back in a second. Just a good, old-fashioned freak-out.