Womadelaide is not just a highly successful musical occasion, it is a key fixture in the Adelaide cultural calendar. That is made clear enough at the afternoon press call before the Friday night opening. All the major players are there. Kate Brennan, on behalf of the Adelaide Festival Centre, is taking a last opportunity to claim sovereignty over Womad in Adelaide now that the Trust is relinquishing its executive management role to ArtsSA Major Events and a much more direct link to Premier Mike Rann.

The Premier speaks strongly in support of Womadelaide, of his titanic struggle to wrest it from the hands of Sydney and Melbourne interlopers, and its strategic significance - in tandem with his current pet project, the Adelaide International Film Festival - as the March highlight in the Festival off-year. He, along with Womad UK director, Thomas Brooman reiterates the importance of Womadelaide now as an annual event - which has many people, including Fringe organisers, wondering what sort of entertainment ecosystem we will have in Adelaide in the middle weekend of the Festival, and whether an embarrassment of riches will mean depleted attendances all round.

That remains to be seen. But in 2003, Womadelaide is as amiable and familiar and populous as ever. Event Director, Ian Scobie, from Arts Projects Australia, says that the site crew are threatening to get T shirts printed with Same As Last Time written on them, such is his unwillingness to alter a winning formula. And he is right. Where so much of our lives is subject to change - often arbitrary, on the cheap, and for the worse - it is a pleasing reassurance, arriving through the gates of Botanic Park, to see that the layout is immediately recognisable. It has been tweaked a little to minimise sound bleeds from one performance area to another, but the traditional geography enables people to identify favourite picnic spots under the trees, and establish those ritual encampments which makes Womad such a sociable event. It is like settling in for a day at the cricket.

I have said before, it is a piece of luck that Womad was first set up as a festival event and not as a stand-alone commercial venture. It has meant privileged access to leafy, green Botanic Park and production values that are quite exceptional. The sound, supervised by David Arbon, is as good
this time as it has ever been - crisply clear, plenty of bass, and distortion free - and, with the precision miking now possible, even the humblest bodhran and smallest whistle can sound majestic.

The Womad landscape is an autumn delight. Complementing the natural beauty of the Moreton bay figs are the huge rippling flags designed in soft pastels by Angus Watt. Also intriguing is the sand sculpture of The Rope Story, an initiative from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara elders, and the giant video projections by Craig Walsh which, startlingly animating the trees at night, have us wondering if Tolkien’s Ents have sneaked into Womad this year.

The array of stalls and exhibitions continues to appeal to the random browser - it’s good to see Imprints bookshop represented and the expertise of Big Star Records at the CD tent. The various caterers do well to meet the extensive demand but the food is perhaps not as varied this time round. And a couple of outright gripes - too few staff at the box office on Hackney Road mean unacceptably long and slow queues for tickets on Friday night, and, again, the toilet facilities struggle as the night queues grow longer.

So what about the music? Overall, I would say this is the least distinguished Womadelaide so far. But I need immediately to temper that remark by acknowledging that over ten years Womad has presented work of such high calibre that it has set its own formidable precedents. This year perhaps proves most clearly that the event is now much greater than the sum of its parts. It is obvious that much of the audience is happy to wander in the park, having bought a ticket out of the rat race for a couple of days. If the music is great, that is almost a bonus.

Womad is for the overworked, the hassled, the worried well, it is where parents can let their kids roam unsupervised more than they ever can usually. The precinct is safe, there are scads of organised activities for children - the whole thing is about as placid as you can get. Even with fifteen thousand people sitting on top of each other, there is room for all. No-one gets drunk or obnoxious - or not that I saw. Everyone gives everyone else a fair go. This time especially, it is as though people know full well that the world is going to go ballistic in two weeks. So here is a place where tranquility and tolerance can be cherished.
For that reason the idea of harmony through music, for all its idealism, is a powerful one. It may be transitory, but when you have musicians from Pakistan, Senegal, Colombia, Zimbabwe, Japan, Afghanistan, Tatarstan, indigenous United States and Australia, the UK, Ireland and Mexico all gathered in one place, it is a tangible reminder that music is a language and, at the moment, a more articulate and communicative one than that of war and diplomacy.

For me, the outstanding performance is from Ernest Ranglin who, beaming his way through two of the most fluent sets of rock-steady ska, showed, with his excellent saxophonist and keyboard player, how his music can morph into jazz, reggae and rhythm and blues with equal facility and flair. At seventy he is a champion of taste and understatement. No wonder Bob Marley named him as his guru. Also, full of beans are Los de Abajo - translated meaning “those from below”. They are the full-tilt voice of Mexico City. Mixing rap, salsa, Tijuana brass and funk rock with a vibrant social justice agenda, singer Liber Teran leads the ten piece band in every sense of the world. On Friday night they are fun, I get closer in on Sunday night and they are like a marvellous punky version of Spike Jones and the City Slickers. Their politics are young and brash and brave - and we need them now more than ever.

For many, West Australian act The Waifs are a discovery - and they prove a best seller at the Big Star tent - but they have spent ten long years touring and refining their fresh and tasty country blues sound. The hit song, London Still, sounds haunting among the trees as does Fisherman’s Daughter and others from their Up All Night CD. The Waifs have played Big Day Out and supported Bob Dylan but they have now made big strides into the Womad constituency.

Also memorable are Indian sarod player Amjad Ali Khan who, in an ensemble including two of his sons, provides long and winding ragas for a very attentive late night crowd on Friday, and Senegalese Moslem, Cheikh Lo, whose jazzy quartet is a mix of seventies Miles Davis, Buena Vista Cuban and, with distinctive talking drum inflections, his West African heritage as well. He is a classy performer, more introverted than some of the African performers we have seen previously, but more sparing and nuanced as well.
In the Celtic idiom, Irish singer Cara Dillon performs a charming set with Sam Lakeman on guitar and second vocal and his brother Seth, prominent on piano. Dillon sings soft-trad material like *Black is the Colour* as well as new compositions. They set a nice ambience for Friday night in the relative intimacy of Stage Three. Shooglenifty only play once, on Friday night, and seem down on energy and dexterity while from Quebec, Les Volee d’ Castors, unenticingly downbeat on Friday night, win new fans the following day at Stage Two, as do Felpeyu, from the Asturia region in north-western Spain.

Virtuoso Hawaiian style steel guitarist Bob Brozman is more muted this time, providing a showcase for his Okinawan collaborator Takashi Hiruaysu, while Zulya and her group provide an appealing set of songs from the former Soviet bloc territory of Tatarstan. Disappointing are Rachid Taha, the Algerian rocker part Springsteen, part Nick Cave, who plays a dishevelled set on Friday night and improves considerably on Saturday, Julien Jacob from Benin, who plays a very anhodyne version of Paris pop, and the clumsy collaboration between the heavy handed rhythm of UK clubsters, Temple of Sound and the Rizwan-Muazzam Quawwali - the latter redeeming themselves entirely with their own set last thing on Saturday night.

There were some acts I miss that many speak highly of - Douglas Spotted Eagle, Adelaide’s own Liam Gerner, Apodimi Compania, King Kadu and South African performer Madosini for instance - but the workshops I manage to see from Cheikh Lo and Amjad Ali Khan - are a reminder that the smaller stages are full of marvellous detail and a festival in themselves.

The Sunday night All Star Festival Finale is convened by English cellist Matthew Barley. There is a silence for peace, a heart-felt poem from Irish singer Andy White, a vocal by Zulya and a number of rambling group jams led by Bob Brozman and featuring a slew of drummers from various bands, enthusiastically oblivious to Barley’s attempts to keep the whole event under his baton. Ernest Ranglin plays a terrific groove and the Los de Abajo brass section shines before the over-rated Temple of Sound returns to hog the stage with a long and bombastic version of *Low Rider*. It funks and swings on while the audience watches somewhat bored and bewildered and when it eventually grinds to a halt there is not the crest of applause that befits the conclusion of three excellent days of Womad.
Instead, the crowd peels away somewhat awkwardly, wondering perhaps where the real headline act has got to - the Salif Keita or Baaba Maal of previous events. Looking for that upbeat finale, reverberating in our ganglia as we trudge through the park, carting our bags and blankets and already getting jazzed up for Womadelaide to start all over again next time.