This year’s is the twelfth Big Day Out and I think I’ve been to all but four. Nevermind that I wasn’t cool enough to see Kurt Cobain back in 1992, the BDO has been just the thing for a music tourist like me. Every food group in popular music is represented from high protein to extreme carbohydrate and - with seven venues running in parallel universes - for the price of a ticket you get more than seventy hours music in the space of twelve.

Big Day Out gives us the past, the modish present and always a glimpse of the ineffable future. The Prodigy, bridesmaids in 1996, were the lords of all they surveyed the following year. Last year the virtually unknown White Stripes played a small side stage, now they are the New Carpenters. But it is the chance to see zany little bands like Osaka’s Shonen Knife or those Mormons in alfoil, Rocket From the Crypt, or bands of the calibre of Dirty Three, Wilco and yes, Coldplay, that makes the event so engaging.

Not that it is just the music. Big Day Out is a significant spot in the religious calendar. Universities no longer even try to enrol on that day and government schools brace themselves for a pandemic of truancy on the first Friday of term. Perhaps it is this sense of stolen mischief which give the event its buzz, or maybe, in among the rides and exhibition halls of the Royal Show, it carries the promise of the funfair.

Certainly it is a friendly old place, even with its mix of tribes. Skaters and surfers, wilting Goths, ravers and hepcats, even bewildered seniors such as myself - all are waiting patiently while some 28,000 of us step through the turnstiles. BDO is smooth in its admission and security procedures and local organisers - Dianne Joy, Sacha Sewell and the team - demonstrate yet again that they know how to run a raffle.

Many of us are in early so as not to miss The Darkness. Led by the flouncing Justin Hawkins in a variety of glam rock jumpsuits The Darkness are the Next Big Thing. They are, it is said, turning the page on electronica and back to rock - or at least that species of fop rock that
Freddie Mercury, Robert Plant and Mick the Lips all did rather well. The Darkness are actually all piss, wind and pastiche - and likeable for it. But they are symptomatic, I fear, of these washed out times of recycle and spin.

Rocking hard seems to be the thing this year. Everyone is thrashing - as if they think The Darkness and The Strokes and oh yes, headliners Metallica, will make everyone else look cissy. The Datsuns and Sleepy Jackson were at it, as was Muse, who trashed the subtler sound of their albums into disappointing sludge. Blood Duster, Lost Prophets and Poison the Well were born to sound like angle grinders of course, so I preferred the Persian Rugs, aka the Hoodoo Gurus, who played some goodtime rock and roll, and hiphop stars Black-Eyed Peas who showed their considerable flair with a set including What is Love and Shut Up. The Mars Volta played their Floyd-like Drunkship of Lanterns but when they began to go murky I wandered off to the Boiler Room and the esoteric ambience of Aphex Twin.

The treat for me was Peaches doing her one woman send-up of the whole day’s proceedings. I had to sacrifice the Kings of Leon but it was worth it. Flanked occasionally by two women assistants complete with leather phalluses, Peaches gave us performance art karaoke. New Yorkers Karen Finley and Penny Arcade woulda been proud of this girlfriend when, complete with her stage prop axe delivered by an abject male technician, she strutted and swaggered and guitar-synched, and generally reminded us how close to the border of Spinal Tap this whole electric music business runs.

The Dandy Warhols are only a recent discovery for me and I notice they have a devoted local following for their friendly strummy sound, garnished with electronics and trumpet voluntary. I am going home to get better acquainted with those 13 Tales of theirs. Also pleasing and surprisingly poppy are The Strokes. They open with a Clash cover and do their Take it or Leave it thing. They sound like the Rascals when young, and like many of the New York harmony bands before them. Singer Julian Casablancas gets a bit jittery near the end of the set and, as if it’s something we said - or didn’t say enough- it comes to what seems like an abrupt halt.
Oh well, a few extra minutes to get up close to Metallica - if you are one of the orc army, dressed in regalia ancient and modern, marching into position in front of the Blue Stage. This is a big occasion for the metal-lickers - two hours of the Great Ones. The atmosphere is what they used to call - palpable. For me, I stay long enough to hear James Hetfield sweet-talk the crowd like a Vegas lounge act. Unctuous isn’t in it. Then he talks about the music as a vehicle for expressing anger - did I hear that right? Are they in the anger management business now? Whatever it is, by the time they got to Search and Destroy I made my retreat while the band prowled about the stage hefting their instruments like they were the recently dismembered limbs of a woolly mammoth. I walk through the crowd which is having a blissful encounter of the Third Kind. Me, I can’t quite forget Napster and all that corporate spiel. So it goes.

Felix da Housecat plays some beats to get me through to the real high point. The Flaming Lips, riding high on memories of jelly and a spiffy new CD Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots, they are a non-stop party. Balloons, flickering big screens, confetti, what looks like a hundred and thirty people in animal suits and the main man, the Lead Lip, taking us over the hill to the Emerald City...

Well, actually to the gate and home. Not as braindead as in the heat wave years and in the benign company of the only mildly inebriated. No bad scenes, no warnings about the brown acid, BDO shows that the world can live as one. Or as a series of demographics and focus groups ready for the next round of commerce. I take off my guest wristband - it has little black dinosaurs all around it. Is it is sign, a portent? I am afraid to enquire whether I am the only one to have one like it - is it some kind of geriatric code? I decide that I am being just a little paranoid. After all, we are all dinosaurs here. But I like being one of those Flaming Lips herbivores, I think. That Metallica stuff is too much for me.