

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Womadelaide 2001

It is February and the "off-year" for the Adelaide Festival, so it must be time for Womadelaide. This is the sixth incarnation -including the Pimba train ride and the McLaren Vale boutique version in 1998- and expectation is now higher than ever. This event has come a long way since its inception as part of the 1992 Festival of Arts. Back then, director Rob Brookman had originally intended to use Belair National Park as the venue but the CFS vetoed the idea for safety reasons. The move to Botanic Park was a last minute stroke of genius and it is now clear that its continued availability has ensured that Womadelaide has become a significant drawcard for the city, one of those blue chip major events claimed by politicians, tourism promoters and various other purveyors of things Sensational.

Fortunately, though, Womad is sufficiently idiosyncratic to resist corporate takeover. Amongst the estimated 65,000 visits to the park are represented all generations, many tribes, and most demographics.. Womad is a great big picnic with extraordinary music, high production values, quality amenities and skilfully unobtrusive management. Few events on this scale are as relaxed, amiable and safe for everyone in the perimeter.

For all these reasons, the recidivist rate is high. In 1999 it was estimated that 90% had been to Womad before. Which accounts for the ritualised aspects of the occasion. The layout is reassuringly familiar, the protocols kept scrupulously intact, even the weather somehow manages to be ideal- sunny days and sublimely balmy evenings. You'd have to say, all things considered, it is recipe guaranteed to work every time.

Not surprisingly, after five Womadelaides in nine years, the audiences have become very au fait with a remarkable range of music. Adelaide crowds have seen some of the very best, including the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Subramaniam, Remmy Ongala and the Guo Brothers as well as pop luminaries such as Peter Gabriel and Crowded House. We have seen esoteric tuva vocalists, Sardinian folk groups, Cuban *son*-sters, klezmer exponents and Bulgarian a cappella. What used to be, unsatisfactorily, called World Music has now become music from around the world, a world now expanded to include the peripheries of Europe, Africa and Asia. There is still, of course, a tendency towards the exotic, of a sort of musical zoo, where the traditions, political context and cultural integrity of the material are at risk. Zimbabwean singer Oliver Mtukudzi raised some

of these issues in workshops back in 1999. He is back this year and it will good to hear more of what he has to say.

Looking over the program there is much to get enthused about. There is a strong Australian component and, consistent with Rob Brookman's creditably forthright statements on Reconciliation at last November's media launch, the inclusion of distinguished Aboriginal performers such as the Narbalek band from Arnhem Land, David Blanasi and the White Cockatoo Performing Group and, backed by Karma County, sixties crooner Jimmy Little will also be back on the telephone. The Stiff Gins, three stylish vocalists from Sydney, promise to rival the now-disbanded Tiddas- that is, if the media preview is anything to go by. Art works from the Anangu Pitjantjara artists from the State's far North will be on display as will the National Reconciliation Sea of Hands project.

Among the traditional performers is Meng Pichenda, a Cambodian vocalist, she is accompanied by Khmer violinist Ieng Sithul. Perhaps the most esoteric instrument

at Womad will be the duduk, a unique reed instrument performed by Armenian Divyan Gasparayan. He is something of a cross-over performer by all accounts - having worked on film soundtracks with Peter Gabriel, as well as collaborations with Kronos Quartet and - yikes- Lionel Ritchie. Another esoteric instrument getting the pop treatment is the gaita or Galician bagpipes played by Carlos Nunez who has performed with the Chieftains and Ry Cooder. His recent CD Mayo Longo has me a little cautious- bombastically overproduced, it even features Roger Hodgson, formerly of Supertramp. Nunez has been called the Jimi Hendrix of the pipes. I hope he manages to rise above the desperation of copywriters.

Among the women performers we have Argentinian Barbara Luna who has strong tango and Afro-Cuban influences. Her CD *A La Vida, a la Muerte* recorded in Paris in 1998 is well worth a listen. She should be a smoky late night highlight. Chava Alberstein is a kind of Israeli Joni Mitchell whose songwriting spans a variety of genres and a range of subjects from the personal to the political. She sings mostly in Yiddish and Hebrew - I hope we have the benefit of some translation - like the lyric sheets to her recent album *Crazy Flower*.

Rokia Traore from Mali is an artist of great delicacy and range and her CD *Wanita* is a definite purchase from the record tent. Traore's lilting vocal with haunting percussion and guitar accompaniment makes compelling listening and, in the Malian *griot* tradition she sings in praise of poets and speaks out against injustice and political corruption. Again, it is to hoped

that some of her songs will be introduced in English. Her delicate musicality is often in stark contrast to the sentiments in her lyrics.

For this reason Femi Kuti, leading proponent of Nigerian Afrobeat, should be a lively act, equal to the great African rhythm bands of Salif Keita and Baaba Maal. Kuti sings in a kind of English patois on his recent release, *Shoki Shoki*, a terrifically high octane bag of funk grooves, high profile horns and tireless congas. His band is called The Positive Force and they are well-named.

I have often thought that Womad has been slow to include blues, cajun, bluegrass and other North American traditional and roots music. The inclusion of Bob Brozman, master of the National Resonator guitar is most welcome. Brozman is a superb guitar stylist whether in Hawaiian forms, ragtime or Delta blues. He also has some of the tent show theatricality of Leon Redbone and Roy Bookbinder. I have been listening in amazement to his 1992 CD *A Truckload of Blues* (Rounder) He has a ferocious technique and his take, even on the hallowed repertoire of Robert Johnson, is unerring.

The return of guitar wizard, Richard Thompson, is, for many, tantamount to the Second Coming. The founder of Fairport Convention has produced a succession of solo albums each more dazzling than the last. He is a consummate song writer as his most recent album *Mock Tudor* yet again attests.

Irish band Flook!, if their CD *Flatfish* is any indication, are a flute-and-whistle driven instrumental quartet whose waltzes, jigs and Sligo reels should provide the kind of gaelic knees-up we have come to expect from bands like Kila and Shooglenifty. Which brings us to the Afro-Celt Sound System - Simon Emmerson's dance beat phantasmagoria featuring Irish singer Iarla O'Lionnaird, African drummers N'Faly Kouyate and Moussa Sissokho, accordionist James McNally and keyboardist and programmer Martin Russell. The Afro Celts first visited in 1997 just before their first CD, which eventually sold more than 250,000 units, turned into Peter Gabriel's RealWorld label's first hit record. Pernickity about their stage set-up The Afro Celts caused their share of schedule delays last time round - but the wait was worth it. Unlike some of the soft pop mish-mash music which occasionally turns up on the Womad circuit, the Afro Celts are a genuinely original hybrid and an exciting one. Their appearance at Womad is serious recognition of the place of electronica in the music map - as is the WoZone, based at Adelaide Uni and featuring a range of DJs including Emmerson himself.

The Adelaide Symphony will make another appearance at Womad. Last time it was to perform *The Brendan Voyage* by Irish composer Shaun Davey. This time it is a collaboration with versatile French violinist Gilles Apap. Also, recently announced, is the nine piece Cuban band Sierra Maestre. The Havana based outfit will appear exclusively in Adelaide and should provide some Buena Vistas of their own. Finally, mention should be made of local Adelaide favourites Fruit, the formerly Waving Not Drowning, David Bridie whose new album *Act of Free Choice* has been turning heads and ears and John Butler, a guitarist and singer somewhere in the key of Ben Harper. He will, it seems, be one of very many to watch out for.