

Live Review - Meredith Festival 2008



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Meredith Music Festival is a strange beast, stuck between worlds. Now in its 18th year, the annual sight of delicate hipsters struggling to erect \$30 tents is usually worth the price of admission alone. But the famed musical clashes also appeal -- in an era of bland, single genre bore-fests Meredith still doles out prime-time slots to genuinely left field acts alongside the Triple J-approved. In recent years, Rose Tattoo have been pitted against the Presets and M Ward paired with Clutch, with the single stage healing the rift. When it works it's a beautiful thing. But with festival audiences now craving slamming synths over insular indie the high wire act could soon collapse.

The alarm bells started ringing as I arrived on Friday to witness **Ten East** struggling to ignite a visibly skittish mob of sodden punters. To their credit, the greasy Californians powered relentlessly through stanza after stanza of devastating riffage -- in their element, on a hot and dusty Saturday afternoon, they may well have been show stoppers. But as each 10minute jam got subsumed by its own heaviness you could sense the moment was lost. **Man Man** did their best to push the envelope, laying down a glorious,almost pastoral freakout with a recognisable single nowhere in sight.

All this placed massive pressure on **Regurgitator** to deliver a late night sugar rush. Saddled with the Friday night 'greatest hits' slot, there would have been no complaints if Quan Yeomans and co. had played their 12 year-old *Tu Plang* album from start to finish. Instead, the band ventured down the risky path of 'new material' -- mostly irritating undergraduate pop from last year's *Love and Paranoia* record. The synth-heavy highlights from 1998's *Unit* held up okay, the tracks from 1996's *New EP* less so. 'Black Bugs' remains irresistible, its dumb-ass change-ups cutting a cuddly swathe through the 1amsludge.

With the 'Gurge loose and goofy, **Holy Fuck** were all focused and workmanlike, an extended version of single 'Milkshake' prompting heavy head nodding. At times, band members baited each other to up the ante in a mutually satisfying feedback loop as squelchy, relentless bass lines reigned supreme. Locals **The Scientists of Modern Music** attempted to maintain the vibe but faced an uphill battle as tents, and fogged-up cars, beckoned.

Saturday morning, still drizzling. **Tame Impala's** forlorn howls floated across a warzone of drenched

tarps and abandoned tents. **Final Fantasy**, whose fans had clearly decided to avoid the festival and attend sold-out sideshows, produced some moping of the highest order. **The Mountain Goats**, in full nasal glory, eschewed the hits in favour of downbeat album tracks from this year's *Heretic Pride*-- two failed attempts at singalongs owing more to wet socks than a lack of goodwill. A rare cover of Johnny Cash's 'Folsom Prison Blues' smashed it, however.

But it wasn't until the now US-based **Architecture in Helsinki** took the stage that things really got going, a forced hit of bug-eyed wonder just what the punters needed. Vocalist Cameron Bird reveled in a ridiculously over-the-top stage persona recalling Robert Palmer, at one point imploring an unnamed someone to "bring that beat back". Last year's shouty single 'Heart it Races' coincided with a lucky break in the weather, but the wheels feel off after an unforgiveable cover of the *Neverending Story* theme song.

Now DJing between bands is an essential part of any festival -- the usual batch of Sonic Youth standards a clear signal to fire up that hash pipe or scoff a festy fajita. But DJs attempting to actively *compete* with bands is a shameful no-go zone. This is what happened on Saturday night when NZ rockers **The Datsuns** were preceded by a high volume CD version of AC/DC's 'Thunderstruck'. In what seemed like Goo circa-1999, the DJ followed up with Green Day's 'Basketcase' and RATM's 'Killing in the Name' -- crowd pleasers sure, but an unwelcome distraction from what should have been the main game. In any case, The Datsuns produced an underwhelming set that gave the corpse of 2002's 'rock revival' a good seeing-to but couldn't get out of first gear.

So, to **MGMT**. If Regurgitator had crumbled under the weight of Friday's expectations then the tension now was all-engrossing. Facebook statuses were riding on the Dave Fridmann-produced hit makers' weedy shoulders. But in a limp set coming at the tail end of an 18-month tour, the longed-for energy, both on stage and in the audience, was predictably somewhere else. A run of extended psych rock wig-outs were resented even though they were, you know, kind of alright. But when the infectious riff of 'Time to Pretend' hit home, the punters knew exactly what to do -- remove their shirts-- prompting raised eyebrows from those who like their nudity confined to the Meredith Gift. With most of *Oracular Spectacular* present and accounted for, the band returned to run through a DAT-taped version of 'Kids', but by then it was all too late, the night ebbing away in a haze of hoarse yelling from **Muscles** and tiresome track selections from **DJ Streetparty**.

Sunday was owned by **Grand Salvo**, a stoic Paddy Mann assuming the stage and reminding us, as he always does, of a gentler time well before MGMT (and, for that matter, The Rolling Stones). Buried beneath his odes to rural simplicity lies a harder edge, of deprivation and depression, and when filled out by a mini-orchestra, the lusciousness wells. But Mann also represents something unique to Meredith -- a local act cherished for the tunes and not the profile. This goes, too, for the traditional closing slot, occupied on Sunday by a resurgent **Even**.

With sell-outs guaranteed and the cool kids decamping to Golden Plains, the time may be ripe for Meredith's organisers to abandon the traditions of their original trailblazer. But this would be a shame, both for the festival's regulars and those with a commitment to the kind of deeply unpopular music that frustrated and enraptured audiences in equal measure last weekend.

Andrew Crook

(Pics: Kristy Lee)

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