



MATHIELE INZETTE

COULEUR CAFÉ

A veritable who's who of world music stars throng to Brussels for its annual mega-festival. Ed Stocker reports

Let's face it; Brussels doesn't always get good press. Accused of being boring and bureaucratic, any place boasting around 450 different beers, more Michelin starred restaurants per capita than anywhere else in Europe and a rich cultural history can't be bad by most people's standards. Oh, and let's not forget Couleur Café, a festival that manages to secure a stellar line-up of world music artists on a reassuringly consistent basis.

The three-day festival is set in the Thurn & Taxis industrial site north of the town centre. Whilst the thought of an industrial city setting might make some of you regular festival hippies shudder, the location is a pleasant surprise. A massive open space, three towering marquee stages and an Electro World 'club' inside a red-bricked warehouse gave the feeling of being anywhere but in the nation's capital – only the skyscrapers of Brussels' business district poking over the horizon gave it away. Sprinkled wood chippings added an 'urban beach' feel and all seemed to come together in perfect symbiosis. Couleur Café never felt too overcrowded or impossible to navigate and kicked off at about 4pm every day,

Crowds mill around the massive Couleur Café site

leaving enough time to take in the sights, have a great party and then stagger back to a hotel within walking distance. No hastily erected tents in sight – perfect.

And the music? Well that wasn't bad either. Billed as an urban festival comprising the cream of talent from the world's great metropolises, festival organiser Patrick Wallens stressed the importance of stepping away from the outdated, restrictive 'world music' label. "We don't have any desire to return to a cliché and a catalogue. You, you're world music because you do that, you, you're jazz, you, you're hip-hop. What about a rock-punk group from Barcelona? Where do I categorise that? Rock? World? Ska?" That's the beauty of musicians here; they cross musical boundaries and geographical borders, bringing people together by a bit of fun.

So there was Salvador de Bahia's smouldering *axé* star, Ivete Sangalo, in her trademark white dress (she must own a few) and heavily oiled legs. She put on a great poppy show that had the Brazilians putting

most of us to shame with their dance moves and flag waving. Other international superpowers included virtuoso *kora* player Toumani Diabaté; Mexican high energy rock-ska-punk outfit Los de Abajo; Spain's sassy *mestizo* collective Amparanoia; UK turntabalist Gilles Peterson; Brazilian culture minister (and musician) Gilberto Gil; Belgium's very own fusionists Think of One; Fela Kuti's son Seun proving Afro-beat is alive and well and 70s trousers are still fashionable... the list goes on.

Reggae, in all its weird and wonderful forms, was also well represented; something festival organisers were keen to get into the line-up given its relative lack of airtime on the nation's radio stations. The king of *salsamuffin*, Sergent Garcia, back for his third Couleur outing, performed an infectiously upbeat set, getting the young crowd to sway their hips and sing along with him on his reggae-salsa inspired music sung in French and Spanish.

Earlier in the evening Lee 'Scratch' Perry had played at the Univers stage – a man once more famous than Bob Marley and a legend still firmly kicking it with the old school. As usual, as befits a man who has smoked far too many spliffs in his lifetime, he was nothing if not eccentric. Wearing a cap encrusted with sparkling jewels, badges and a mishmash of indecipherable tat – plus a Jamaican flag headband – he shuffled



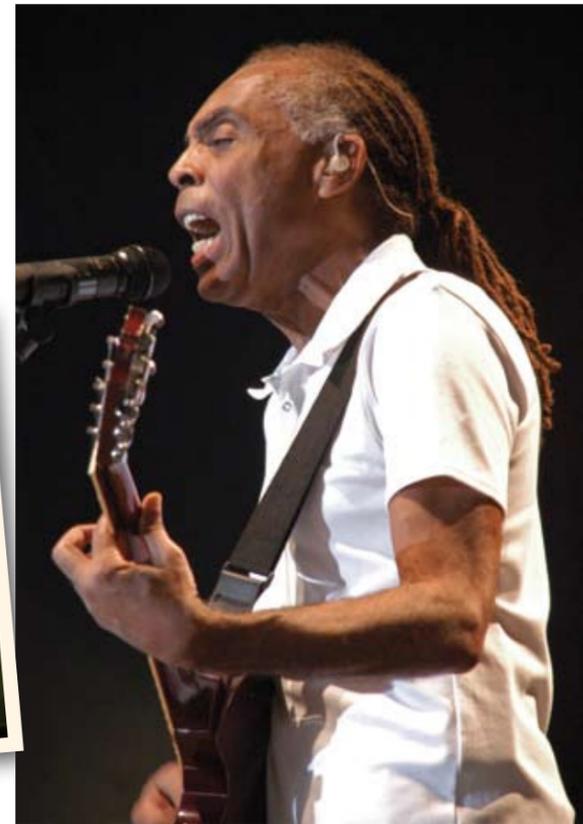
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ALDO WANDERGEN



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Clockwise from left: Brazil's Gilberto Gil give it his all; the heaving Electro World Club; a curiously attired Lee 'Scratch' Perry; giant puppets Los Magnificos. Below: Mr Salsamuffin, Sergent Garcia

together. Wallens explained: "In this small country there is a massive north-south divide. We looked for very different artists, both Flemish and Francophone, to bridge this." The festival is one of the few in the country

where artists singing in both languages are billed side-by-side through a campaign called 'Wanted!' Newcomers El Pueblo de la Lluvia, Jupiter & Massive 5 and Members of Marvelas were all testament to this talent competition that saw 140 entries whittled down to six groups performing at the festival. There was also a massive 'NGO village', intriguing art exhibitions and

With so much musical choice, the crowds wiggled their hips wherever they could find a place, buoyed by unremitting sunshine for three days

information on the various African projects the festival was involved in. How refreshing also to find a festival with a genuine social conscience, managed by a non-profit organisation (Zig Zag) and selling tickets at inclusively low prices. Compare the €64 (£43) three day ticket prices with some of the far pricier UK festivals for example.

Meanwhile, back at the party, people tucked into food from the abundance of stalls dotted around the site and sipped on Belgian's rather tasty amber nectar. With so much musical choice, the crowds wiggled their hips wherever they could find a place, buoyed by unremitting sunshine for three days, unusual for a capital that normally experiences similar grey-skied drizzle to London. On Sunday night the last of the festival faithful moved to US funkster George Clinton, smiles painted all over their faces. The following day *Le Soir* newspaper gushed: 'Couleur Café has once again proven its warmth and ability to make people happy.' And it really had. ●

Couleur Café takes place from June 29-July 1 2007
www.couleurcafe.be

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