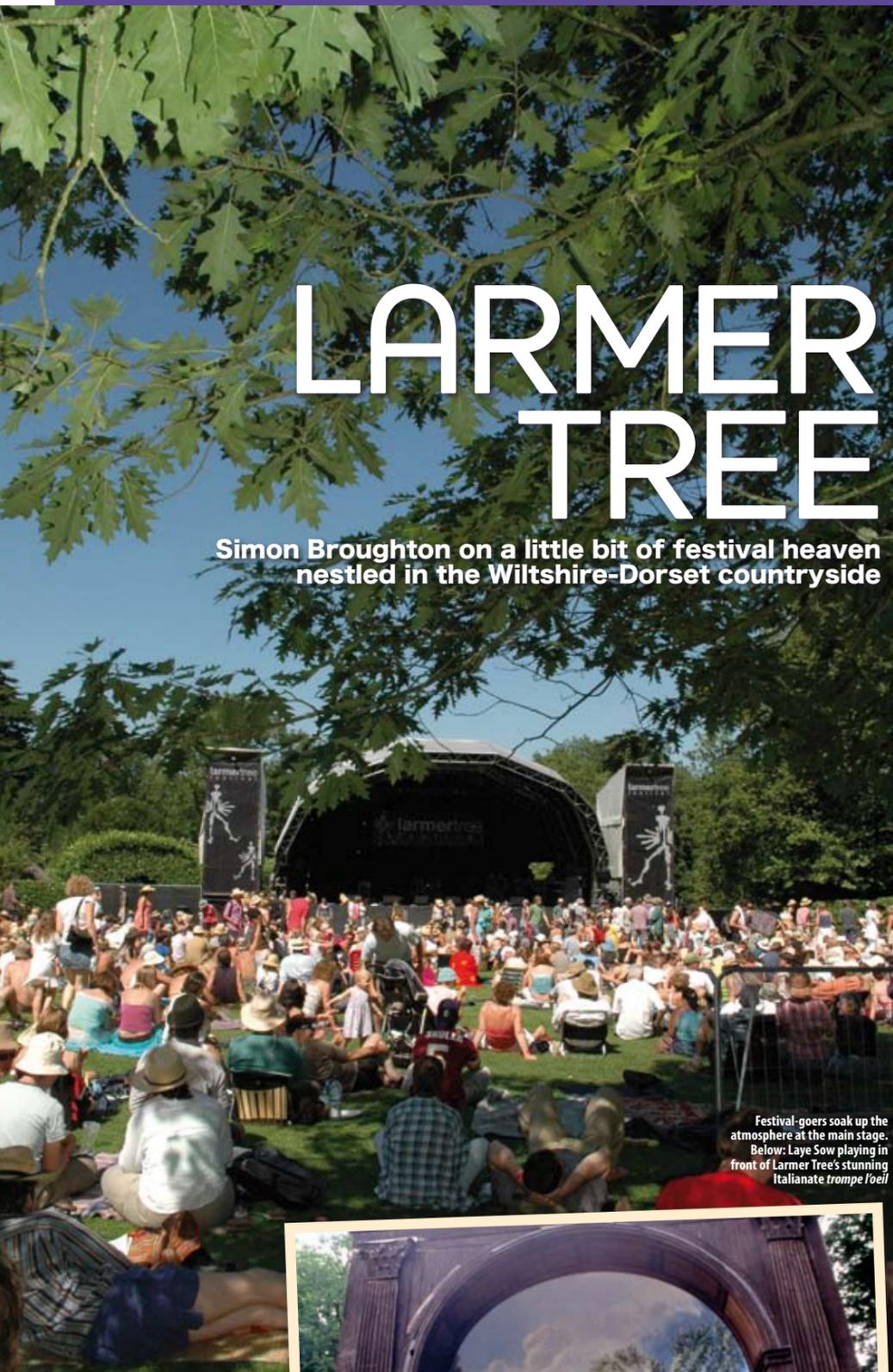


# LARMER TREE

Simon Broughton on a little bit of festival heaven nestled in the Wiltshire-Dorset countryside



Festival-goers soak up the atmosphere at the main stage. Below: Laye Sow playing in front of Larmer Tree's stunning Italianate trompe l'oeil



SIMON BROUGHTON

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JOHNNY GLOSTER

More often than not, music festivals take place in vast open fields. But that's not what you get at Larmer Tree. The area in front of the main stage is surrounded by gorgeous gardens and old trees, there's a half-timbered house and peacocks shrieking from the roof. Carefully positioned around the grassy lawn is a circular Roman temple, a Nepalese pavilion, and a small stage with a painted *trompe l'oeil* Italianate landscape. It would be the perfect backdrop for some nymphs and shepherds, but Senegalese guitarist Laye Sow didn't look half bad there either.

The setting was actually created as a music garden in the 1880s by the soldier and archaeologist General Pitt-Rivers (1827-1900) who inherited the 27,000 acre Cranborne Chase estate. To the disapproval of the local clergy, he opened the garden on Sundays and people would come to picnic, listen to music and watch racing, which took place on what is now the campsite. The oriental buildings were bought after being on display in London at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in South Kensington in 1886 and the *trompe l'oeil* stage, which Pitt-Rivers called "the Singing Theatre," was built in 1895. When you can see Dartmoor's Seth Lakeman or Egypt's El Tanbura in a location like this, then no wonder Larmer Tree gets described as a 'boutique festival'.

"I don't like the term, but somebody thought it up and it's become a shorthand," moans James Shepard who started the Larmer Tree Festival in 1990. "But basically we do what we do. It's like having a party. You want all your guests to have a good time and to create something you can be proud of in the end." Shepard's business partner, Julia Safe, used to work at the Salisbury Arts Centre and so organising music workshops around the event was second nature. "The festival that inspired me was Bracknell Jazz Festival in the 70s," admits Shepard, "and I was always looking for a nice venue to do something."

Larmer Tree takes its name from an actual tree, a wych elm, which stood on the boundary of Wiltshire and Dorset where King John met his men before going out hunting. The original King John tree from the 13th century is no longer there, but there's a replacement which still marks the Wiltshire-Dorset boundary behind the big beer tent facing the main stage.

The 1990 festival was a one-day affair from midday to midnight and it's grown slowly since then. Now Larmer Tree is a five-day event with Jools Holland kicking off the proceedings on the Wednesday night. "We've sold a lot of five-day tickets," says Shepard. "People like to escape and it's like going into another world for a while." As it's licensed for just 4,000 people, Larmer Tree is always going to be small and intimate and that is



RICHARD SERCOMBE



STEVE JONES

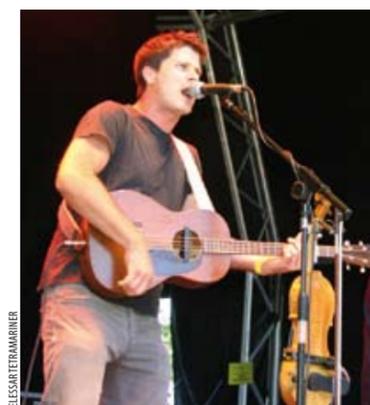
part of the appeal. It means you can get lost in the gardens, you don't have to queue for the toilet and you can get closer to the music.

Like everything else at the festival, the music feels hand-picked and although it includes folk, blues, jazz and many other things, world music is an important part of the line-up. "My musical taste is very wide," admits Shepard. "And because we always sell out, we can be more adventurous when choosing the acts. We can't afford to bring groups in specially, but we can get a good selection of people already on tour in the UK." Amongst many world music artists performing this year are Ozomatli, Balkan Beat Box, Los de Abajo, El Tanbura, Baka Beyond with Baka Gbiné and the Nizami Brothers. But how can you ignore a band like Circulus who describe themselves as 'Britain's foremost medieval-influenced progressive psychedelic folk band, playing a mix of modern and medieval instruments,

## Wander after dark through trees to the sculpture garden. It's like entering an enchanted world

and dressing in period style.'

Alongside the music and stages, there are lots of workshops – for music, dance, circus skills, yoga and tai chi. There's a Secret Garden set aside for massage, holistic healing and therapies, another area for sculpture and clay modelling and plenty of places for hands-on activities for children. The most beautiful experience is to wander after dark along the winding lane through trees to the sculpture garden. It's decorated with candles and lanterns and feels like entering an enchanted world. It's simple but imaginative things like this that give Larmer



ELESSA BERTRAMMER



CHRISTIAN PAYNE

Tree its particular atmosphere.

A clear sign of success is its returning clientele who simply come year after year. Before I'd ever visited the festival, I'd heard about it from enthusiastic friends. "We've been going every year for about 12 years – it's a fixture on the family calendar," says one. "It's like a rainbow-coloured garden party with Somerset beer, real sausages, beautiful gardens and good music. The small scale and family-friendly atmosphere means the kids can wander around a bit on their own which gives them a tremendous sense of freedom. My ten-year-old still remembers getting 'lost' when she was about five, but she was returned to us within minutes. The music policy is refreshingly open-minded, with an eclectic range of world music, folk, blues, dub, country, foot-stomping regulars and new discoveries each year. The kids activities are fantastic, and our girls spend hours through the weekend making their costumes for the carnival procession on the Sunday, which is our ritual end to the festival."

Larmer Tree tries to benefit the local community too. Where possible contractors and caterers are found locally, a couple of hundred tickets are given to local residents

and the scout troop are brought in to do litter collection. "They get a donation which pays for their scout hut," says Shepard, "and they do a grand job." It's the attention to detail that's impressive. One year I bumped into someone who'd been asked to report back to the organisers on the catering – the quality of the food, the service, the recycling and so on. It's not just a question of caterers paying for their pitch, but making sure they come up to scratch.

James Shepard might not like the term 'boutique festival,' but certainly everyone seems to agree that small is beautiful. ●

Larmer Tree Festival runs from July 11-15 2007 [www.larmertreefestival.co.uk](http://www.larmertreefestival.co.uk)

## Competition

We have a pair of four-day tickets (Thurs-Sun) worth £135 each, to give away. To enter, simply answer the following question:

What's the name of the music programme Jools Holland presents on BBC2?

See p5 for Songlines competition rules and address. Closing date June 15 2007

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