

# RITE OF SPRING FESTIVAL



**Reykjavik – the most northerly capital in the world – now boasts its very own world music festival. Jane Cornwell reports on its inauguration**

“Hello, I want to eat your car,” sings Bogomil Font, erstwhile drummer for the Sugarcubes, to upbeat calypso backing from a jazz trio named Flís. Trumpet, keyboards and fretless bass create a sunny island sound as Font (pictured right) – debonair in sky blue suit and white boater – plays spoons against his leg, sticks his tongue in his cheek and wiggles his moustache. The audience at NASA wiggle right back at him as they bounce about to surreal tales of edible automobiles, ugly girlfriends and lying weather reporters, sung in English and, er, Icelandic. For though his music is brazenly Caribbean, this Nordic King Creole (real

name: Sigtryggur Baldursson) is crooning his loony tunes in his own language, in his hometown’s most popular venue, surrounded by a local crowd who are giggling while they are dancing.

Welcome, then, to weird, wonderful Reykjavik. Two thirds of Iceland’s 300,000 people live in the world’s northern-most capital, a Lego-like mishmash of ancient wooden houses, primary-coloured tin roofs and futuristic buildings made from concrete, steel, glass and lava. It may be the thermal energy boiling underground, or even Iceland’s 1,200-year-old Viking heritage, but



here everyone seems to be an artist, writer or designer (not to mention young, hip, impossibly good-looking and in three bands at once). And here everyone loves to party. At weekends the whole city partakes in the legendary Icelandic pub crawl, the *runtur*, buoyed by a white spirit called Black Death – a drink that puts hairs on chests, makes people dance like loons and empties the wallet quicker than you can say Björk Gudmundsdóttir.

Reykjavik is eye-poppingly expensive. But if it’s music you’re after, the odd affordable festival package can help soften the blow. This was the first ever Rite of Spring Festival, a four-day shindig featuring just nine acts – some of them world, some of them jazz, some of them smugly indefinable. Though renowned as a music festival hotspot (the Iceland

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Airwaves Festival is an international must for lovers of pop and rock; the Iceland Jazz Festival is, well, precisely that), Reykjavik is a relative newcomer to world music. The few acts that have played here – Cesaria Evora and Fanfare Ciocărlia among them – have attracted mixed, open-minded crowds, but their promotion has proved hard work. Now, thanks to visionary promoters Mr Destiny, the company behind Airwaves, the sounds of the world will be heard at the top of the world on an annual basis.

“Generating interest in world music has been difficult,” says Thorsteinn ‘Steinni’ Stephensen, founder-director of Mr Destiny. “There is little awareness of it here. So Rite of Spring is about trying to create a scene away from the overexposed Anglo music scene, and one that doesn’t really exist yet. We figure that a festival is the most powerful way of doing this. We’ll build it

slowly over the next few years.”

Named after Igor Stravinsky’s eponymous composition, Rite of Spring is a fascinating work in progress. One which saw local musicians – isolated enough to put their own spin on other sounds, talented enough to get away with it – out in collaborative force. Petter Winnberg, Swedish-born bassist with reggae crew Hjalmar, led his new, unnamed 11-member group onstage like some dreadlocked Pied Piper, delivering a promising – if endearingly shambolic first outing. Nine-piece big band Nix Noltes – featuring musicians from local hipsters Múm – shared their passion for Bulgarian and Balkan folk music in suitably cacophonous fashion, fired by a sousaphone and a vaguely terrifying take on Eastern European tradition. Their singular stance was both in contrast and in synch with their support band, KAL – a fiery gaggle of Gypsy



Clockwise from left: Salsa Celtica; Reykjavik’s beautiful landscape; Brazil’s Ife Tolentino; Stórsveit Nix Noltes playing at last year’s festival

rockabillys from the ‘burbs of Belgrade. Revving up for the *runtur*, a Saturday night audience danced wildly to both.

Rite of Spring had started gently, with sumptuous *bossa nova* rhythms and silken vocals from Brazilian jazz guitar virtuoso (and underrated London resident), Ife Tolentino. Icelandic pioneers Mezzoforte headlined the opening night, demonstrating exactly why – 20 years on and 11 albums in – their jazz funk stylings first alerted the world to the talent pulsating amidst Iceland’s fjords and fissures. As much a national treasure as, say, the Sugarcubes (from whom Björk sprang fully formed), Mezzoforte’s Duke Ellington-

## A hot waterfall thunders next to a sauna and men in Viking hats slurp on beers

meets-Weather Report sound felt vaguely dated in a festival with a remit to be cutting edge – but it was a pleasant incongruity, nonetheless. “I don’t think it’s wise to tame this animal too much,” shrugs Steinni of Rite of Spring. “It’s very hard to predict the direction we’ll end up taking.”

Evening-only concerts left days free for sightseeing, horseriding (an integral part of the Icelandic scene; there is roughly one pony to every three locals) and most importantly, recovering. When great gulps of pure Icelandic air failed to revive, we staggered instead to the Blue Lagoon, one of Reykjavik’s several state-of-the-art outdoor heated pools and the capital’s most frequented tourist attraction. There, steam rises in sheets into a bright, flat Atlantic sky, a hot waterfall thunders next to a sauna and – on the day we went, anyway – men in Viking hats slurp on beers while they soak. Health restored and toxins relieved, we headed back to NASA for Rite of Spring’s penultimate night. Back in this most central of venues we undid our good work, courtesy of Black Death and Salsa Celtica.

The great Scottish party band were in fine literal fiddle, their fusion of Cuban *charanga* and salsa and Celtic strings and bagpipes ensuring that NASA had lift off from the start. Sweat flew onstage and off as one style morphed furiously into another. At the bar up the back, Steinni grinned broadly. Rite of Spring was well and truly sprung. ●

Rite of Spring 2007 is May 17-20. More details about the line-up will be announced soon. [www.riteofspring.is](http://www.riteofspring.is)

Icelandair offers exclusive Rite of Spring packages, including return flights, accommodation and festival passes. [www.icelandair.co.uk](http://www.icelandair.co.uk) or 0870 787 4020

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