



Sfinks Festival, Belgium

Belgium's most culturally diverse festival celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. **Stan Rijnen** looks at the formula which makes this event such a success

Imagine a rural village with lush avenues, Victorian estates and green gardens. Wouldn't it be the perfect site for a world music festival? Well, there is one and its name is Sfinks in Boechout, Belgium. At the end of July the longest running world music event on the continent will celebrate its 30th birthday. Astor Piazzolla, Goran Bregovic, Franco, Gilberto Gil, Lhasa, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Youssou N'Dour have all played at this shady shangri-la close to Antwerp. Patrick de Groote, festival director since 1983, remembers: "We started in 1976 as a folk festival programming artists from the UK, Ireland and Flanders. It happened on a lazy summer afternoon with a few bands and an audience of 500 people. Last year Sfinks attracted 40,000 visitors in three days to 75 concerts with bands from all over the world."

Although it's got bigger, the atmosphere hasn't changed. I was lucky

enough to visit several early years of the festival. Until 1992 the festival was held in the back garden of an Victorian mansion on Heuvelstraat, in Boechout. Because of its informal atmosphere artists and the audience mixed easily. You could chat with Franco and shake hands with Youssou N'Dour. A huge bar stretched alongside the whole garden supplied Belgian beers. At one side, behind the stage, two huge sphinxes were our cool marble watchmen. It felt like being part of a Tintin cartoon visiting Captain Haddock's Molensloot Castle. "The estate dates back from the 20s when oriental influence was paramount even in garden architecture," de Groote explains. In the early 90s the festival had grown so fast it had to leave the gardens around that romantic mansion. "Instead of an incidental event, world music had become our core business. We had to look for a more extensive site. In 1993 we tried the local soccer grounds, a year later we moved again,



MAIN: *The Dhoad Gypsies of Rajasthan at Sfinks 2004 (Paul Verstreken)*

ABOVE: *Sfinks' early days in the garden of a Victorian mansion*

this time for good, to the beautiful site of Molenveld. Another night was added to the expanding programme. Because of all these changes we considered changing our name, but it remained Sfinks since the sphinx also stands for worldwide wisdom."

Today the original Sfinks philosophy is reflected in the combination of a relaxed field atmosphere and a high-profile music line-up. On peaceful meadows dotted with huge circus tents, one hears bouncing

brass bands from Macedonia and Brazil, stirring ensembles from Zanzibar and electric grooves by eclectic DJs. "Visiting an average festival you'd feel ashamed to meet your parents," says de Groot. "One way or the other that's no problem here, I think this is typical of Sfinks."

The Sfinks secret is threefold. Because of the mix of folk, pop and world music in a careful ambience the festival developed its strong following. "We hardly use the label 'world music'," says de Groot. "I think 'culturally identifiable music' gets near but sounds too clumsy. We try to guarantee 100% diversity. The festival defined itself by growing up with its public. It's all about fine-tuning by finding a perfect balance between artists, stages and audiences."

Over three decades the Sfinks organisation also created a unique position. "Our age is our luck. Many big artists were beginners at the time. They have pleasant memories and are therefore eager to return. More important, we never went for mainstream but always looked at regions others tended to neglect," de Groot observes. At the same time Sfinks kept close contact with the Arabian, African and Latin American communities. "They inform us on the latest developments. So when we invite a hot artist from, let's say Kurdistan, like Şivan Perwer, a substantial part of the listeners will be Kurds. They positively influence the reception of the audience as a whole."



The Sfinks success is based on Belgium's own cultural history. The country is not only densely populated but well connected, it also has the highest festival density in Europe. In summertime you can visit a blues, rock, Latin, folk or world music event every week. Last year 2,000 volunteers recruited from all kinds of clubs and associations turned Sfinks into a grassroots happening, deeply embedded in the local social scene.

And the highlights of the past 30 years? The most memorable event was the festival in 2000. A localised downpour hit Boechout in such a way that the Sfinks field looked like a flood zone. At eight o'clock on the Sunday night, after the last raindrop fell, Goran Bregovic began his magnificent show. A wetter than wet audience watched with water up to their ankles, an apocalyptic performance that reflected the turbulent cradle of his hybrid Balkan melting pot.

"It's all about making choices," says de Groot. "Like visiting a mega-supermarket and standing in front of 3,000 different kinds of yoghurt. We always go for the most delicious, hoping that others will share our taste." And Sfinks just keeps tasting better and better. |

This year's festival takes place from July 28-30 2005. www.sfinks.be

This year's highlights include Festo do Brazil with Jorge Ben Jor, Goran Bregovic, Mahmoud Ahmed and Bajofondo Tango Club.