



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

ULSAN WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL

SOUTH KOREA

Jo Frost experiences a festival whose mission is to introduce world music to South Korean audiences whilst bringing Korean culture to the attention of Western artists



It's indicative of the general lack of knowledge about anything Korean to the average Westerner (like myself), that Ulsan didn't even get a mention in the guidebook I purchased in preparation for my trip to its second world music festival. Situated in the south-east of the peninsula, on paper Ulsan doesn't appear to hold much appeal to visitors – except its proximity to the old historic town of Gyeongju, a UNESCO World Heritage site and capital of Korea's Silla kingdom. Ulsan's tourist website claims it's 'the symbol of industrial and economic growth' – which didn't exactly fill me with eager anticipation; neither did the fact that it's home to the Hyundai Heavy Industries company and was formerly a major whaling port.

However, despite the lack of tourist attractions, one considerable plus point this hi-tech, bustling modern city has is its annual world music festival. It's the brainchild of Junghun Lee, a self-confessed *fado* and film fanatic, who seems intent on educating the South Korean public on the joys of music

from outside this most Confucian nation.

Whereas the UK prides itself on its multiculturalism, Koreans are fiercely proud of their monoculture. So a festival which celebrates world music is a relatively new idea and rather paradoxical to their beliefs. This certainly helped explain the underlying pedagogical subtext to the event. "I think a

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world music festival's duty is educational and an exchanging of culture," Lee says. "Because Korea has this monoculture, we're not experienced in cultures from Iran or Israel for example – we don't know much about them. So, to bring more diverse cultures to Korea is actually more important at the moment than [showcasing] Korean artists. Of course, bringing Korean music to a

Korean audience is an easy way, but what's more important is bringing different cultures to people who don't know much about them."

Once you grasp an understanding of this monocultural nation, it comes as no surprise to learn that the festival was initially regarded with some scepticism from the local government. But thankfully it now seems to have been universally embraced by both the local population – who make up over 90% of the audience – and the local media.

The first edition was launched in 2007 as part of the Cheoyong Culture Festival – a long-standing arts initiative, founded in 1967. Cheoyong, a mythical character in Korean history, is believed to have originated from Ulsan during the Silla dynasty (57BC-935AD). Cheoyong's face is a fixture throughout the festival, with Cheoyong figures featuring in the colourful Saturday parade and stalls where you can buy and make your own mask.

The festival takes place in the Ulsan Culture and Arts Center in Munhwa Park – more

Above (left to right): South Korean group Easternox performing on the outdoor stage; not your usual festival fare; the Ulsan Culture and Arts Center; Gipsy.cz delights the crowd; some ass shaking with Tribe of Doris' Penny Avery

business park than a haven of greenery. But, despite lacking a scenic backdrop, the venue more than makes up for it with its fantastic facilities. There's an outdoor amphitheatre – complete with little square aluminium mats to sit on – and an indoor auditorium. The entire three days (and four nights) of the festival are free and every concert packed – 40,000 people attend over the weekend.

“Korea is very much centralised,” says Lee. “In Seoul you can get anything you want, but Ulsan is culturally quite poor.” This could be one explanation for the high attendance figures, but it would be churlish not to credit this to the impressive music programme.

Foreign groups made up around 65% of the line-up, and Portugal, the guest of honour country, featured prominently, with performances by composer Rodrigo Leao and fado singers Cristina Branco and Helder Moutinho. Not only is Lee hoping to educate the Korean public, but also introduce Western artists to Korean culture. The audience get to vote for their favourite act, which in the first year was the Czech hip-hop group Gipsy.cz, who played two nights to wildly enthusiastic crowds, all singing along to ‘Romano Hip-hop’. This year the electro tango outfit Bajofondo will return again, having made their debut Asian performance last year and winning the audience’s Best Group vote. The band seemed genuinely overwhelmed by the public response, despite the over-cautious security efforts to prevent people standing and attempts to stop the impeccably well-behaved crowd invading the stage for Bajofondo’s trademark final number.

The audiences were equally enthusiastic and numerous for the Korean acts: Yesanjok, a *samulnori* (Korean percussion) quartet who performed with a jazz duo; Easternox, a young group doing their own fusion of traditional music; and most impressive of all, Dulsori – a spritely group of drummers and percussion players whose spectacularly energetic display was breathtaking. They certainly annihilated any pre-conceived fears of Korean music being inaccessible.

In addition to the music, the UK’s Tribe of Doris ran a series of workshops from *capoeira* and salsa, to *djembé* drumming and African dancing. Koreans have a tendency to be rather shy and reserved, with the East Asian concept of ‘face’ – known as *gibun* – playing a very important part in Korean behaviour. As a result, these hands-on tuition classes seemed to generate more spectator interest – with curious on-lookers hanging around on the periphery of the workshop tents – than actual participants. However, the undeterred and endlessly enthusiastic Doris team return again this year.



Wandering around the festival site felt not dissimilar to exploring an urban WOMAD, with clothes and knick-knack stands aplenty. But the vast array of food stalls offering all sorts of weird and wonderful looking dishes – including whale, which was not so wonderful – reminded me that I was definitely somewhere



HOW TO GET THERE

- Ulsan is an hour’s flight from Seoul Gimpo airport.
- Most of the major European airlines fly to Seoul Incheon International Airport. From the UK, journey time is 11 hours and the time zone is eight hours ahead of GMT.
- South Korea tourist information: www.visitkorea.or.kr

more far-flung.

The festival is really geared up for kids, with lots of opportunities to get hands on experience – from making masks to face, nail and even mobile phone painting. For the bigger kids (like myself) there was wine tasting and cookery workshops. I got my hands dirty making my new favourite food, *kimchi* (fermented spicy cabbage), which, despite sounding like nasty school dinner leftovers, is delicious and just as well, because it’s served at every meal, including breakfast.

Following the European Forum of Worldwide Music Festivals model (a network of independent festivals), Lee has created a consortium with two other festivals in Asia – the Rainforest World Music Festival in Borneo and Sukiyaki Meets the World festival in Japan. The intention is to encourage and make it financially worthwhile for Western groups to come and tour the region, rather than having just one, costly festival gig. Lee’s vision and belief is infectious and when you witness the sheer joy that visiting groups generated amongst the crowds, then you can only hope that his idea of making South Korea seem not so distant – both geographically and culturally – succeeds. ●

DATES The 2009 Ulsan World Music Festival runs October 9-11. Australia is this year’s guest of honour country and artists will include Mariza, Yasmin Levy and Faiz Ali Faiz

ONLINE www.cheoyong.or.kr

Above: Cheoyong mu (Cheoyong dance) – a court ritual dance, performed at the opening ceremony to ward off evil spirits and to invite good luck. Left: downtown Ulsan

ITCHY FEET?

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