

WOMADELAIDE

AN AUSSIE JEWEL IN THE CROWN by Seth Jordan



On the closing night of WOMADelaide 2003, in March, the finale was an all-in affair, arranged by English cellist Matthew Barley. Seemingly working by the chaos theory, Barley made a brave attempt to supervise the largely unorganisable throng of performers that crowded the stage. Notable vocal contributions during that final set were made by Irish troubadour Andy White and Russian/Tatar singer Zulya Kamalova, backed by legendary Jamaican *ska* guitarist Ernest Ranglin, Okinawan *sanshin* player Takashi Hirayasu, Temple of Sound members, Toto La Momposina's entire Colombian brass section, and an enthusiastic contingent of young hip-hopping Mexicans from Los de Abajo.

Occurring just as the UK, US and Australian troops were being deployed in Iraq, there had been a strong anti-war mood in evidence, both onstage and amongst the festival audience, throughout the weekend. While a little under-rehearsed, the resulting chaotic finale still successfully managed to encapsulate the international spirit and musical camaraderie that had been evident during the entire festival.

Set in the verdant lushness of Adelaide's Botanic Park, WOMADelaide, the Australian leg of the WOMAD musical octopus, has

offered festival-goers a semi-tropical south Australian experience in an urban environment ever since the inaugural event in 1992. With acres of open space ringed by ancient, shade-providing Moreton Bay fig trees, the park site encourages a vibrant Global Village marketplace, colourful art installations, hand-crafted flag displays and other multi-media exhibits. "WOMADelaide has become one of the jewels in the crown," says WOMAD's UK-based artistic director/supremo, Thomas Brooman. "It's such a magic setting, the organisation is superb and the audience is truly wonderful."

Originally staged as part of the Adelaide Arts Festival, WOMADelaide quickly established its own separate identity, running in alternate years to the Arts Festival since 1993. "We initially approached the WOMAD UK people with our concept to bring the WOMAD experience to Australia, and they were quite excited by the prospect," says Rob Brookman, former director of the Arts Festival itself, and current artistic adviser for WOMADelaide. "We already had a deep and passionate interest in presenting high quality classical music from around the world, and after visiting the 1990 Morecambe Bay WOMAD festival, we knew that this was exactly the type of event that we wanted to

offer to Australian audiences."

With weekend attendances in 2003 hitting a record-breaking 65,000, approximately 60% of the audience comes from the immediate Adelaide region, with the remainder attending from further afield. Likewise the mix of artists presented reflects the wealth of available regional Pacific talent, interspersed with touring international performers. "We usually have an average of about 40% Aussie acts, with a strong emphasis on indigenous Aboriginal performers," says Brookman. "We also work very closely with Thomas in England to bring out some of the bigger international acts that the WOMAD organisation there has access to. It's really a collaborative effort that offers the best from all around the world."

The Australian/UK link has also opened up overseas touring opportunities for a number of Australian performers, particularly Aboriginal artists. To date The Bangarra Dance Theatre, Archie Roach, Tiddas, Kev Carmody and Yothu Yindi have all appeared at other international WOMAD events, while Aussie/Tongan singing sisters Vika & Linda and the multicultural Mara! band have both released albums on the Real World label.

And the international highlights from past WOMADelaide festivals? "Oh, it's so hard to



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choose,” says Brookman reminiscing, “but certainly when we had the great Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan at the height of his powers in 1992, that was a memorable ecstatic moment when everything just came together perfectly. Baaba Maal performances in 1999 were also a personal favourite, and Armenia’s Djivan Gasparyan brought a very special flavour to the 2001 festival.”

From a humble two stages, plus an impromptu acoustic area situated under a large tree during the original festival, WOMADelaide’s performance spaces have grown in recent years to three main stages and three intimate smaller stages, which also double as workshop venues. There has also been the late-night WoZone dance club, which has taken place at the nearby University of Adelaide, and opens at about the same time as the main stages at Botanic Park finish. Some of Australia’s freshest and funkier DJs have mixed it up on three WoZone dance floors until just before dawn, alternating sets with visiting international turntable artists.

In WOMADelaide’s earlier years Australian rock acts such as Midnight Oil and Men At Work and Kiwis Crowded House, regularly augmented the world music content. Some festival-goers questioned those inclusions.

“In those years we felt it was necessary to make a special effort to attract a younger audience, in order to entice them to experience the more traditional world acts,” defends Brookman. “That’s no longer the case, as our main line-up – along with the dance venue – now offers plenty of varying talent for all ages.”

The 2003 festival’s international guestlist featured, amongst others, Indian *sarod* maestro Amjad Ali Khan, fretboard wiz Bob Brozman, Irish songbird Cara Dillon, rocking Algerian bad boy Rachid

Taha, dreadlocked Senegalese vocalist Cheikh Lô, Pakistani youngbloods Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali, full-on Scottish band Shooglenifty, and dub-dance pioneers Temple of Sound.

Like a fine south Australian red wine, WOMADelaide has matured well with age. After a decade as a biennial event, a new partnership agreement between WOMAD Ltd, the South Australian government, local organisers Arts Projects Australia and main sponsor Amnesty International, will now see the festival become an annual affair.

The upcoming WOMADelaide 2004 – set to take place from March 5-7 – has just announced its opening line-up, which includes Senegalese superstar Youssou N’Dour (back for his first visit to Australia since 1992), Brazilian cultural icon Gilberto Gil, South African jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, Chilean favourites Inti-Illimani, Athenian vocalist Savina Yannatou, Indian *sarangi* master Sultan Khan, Japanese *tonkori* player Oki Kano and England’s outrageously talented Eliza Carthy.

Further international artists and the full Australian contingent will be announced in January. The 2004 WoZone will also be shifting its format to a new late-night outdoor venue, The Universal Playground, as part of the main Adelaide Arts Festival, which once again will be running concurrently with WOMADelaide.

With no camping facilities available at the Botanic Gardens itself, visitors to Adelaide need to book their own city accommodation ahead of time, with a wide selection of hotel and backpacker lodging to choose from. It’s also essential to bring along a broad-brimmed hat and plenty of sunscreen, as that late-summer southern hemisphere sun can still be quite fierce. ■

For more information and updates check the WOMADelaide website: www.womadelaide.com.au



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