

Wychwood Festival

Horses make way for music out west in Cheltenham as a new festival gathers pace. Nathaniel Handy reports

There is the unmistakable air of the rural west of England to this brand new festival on the busy UK live music scene. On the edge of the Cotswolds lies the spa town of Cheltenham – full of decaying Regency splendour and a rather famous horse racing event: the Cheltenham Gold Cup. It is down at the racecourse on the edge of town that Wychwood Music Festival burst into life on June 3 2005.

Two hours from London, it feels a world away. The pace is easy. There was little or no sign that a festival was even taking place as you approached the site. The taxi firms of Cheltenham had never heard of it. The cider even ran out on the first night. But then, these are the accidents of an opening year – and out here where life moves more slowly, there is plenty of time to reflect, consider that beer will substitute well enough for cider, that the night sky is a beautiful thing whilst the taxi driver finishes his tea, and all is well with the world.

There were teething problems, and every British festival needs the Sun God on its side. Wychwood got a mixed bag of all four seasons over the weekend, but the crowds strolled on regardless. Festival old guards such as the Tiny Tea Tent were in attendance, like the houses of Hobbiton nestled under the trees, alongside stalls of French *tartiflette*, Maghrebi *tagines* and homemade pizzas. And this festival really did have a fantastic line-up for its first year. Mory Kanté, Steve Earle, the Matthew Herbert Band and Alabama 3 headlining the weekend, with other world music offerings from Radio Tarifa, Bollywood Brass Band, Värttinä and Eliza Carthy.

The terrifyingly energetic and bouncing Värttinä raised the heat of the whole event with their rousing Saturday afternoon barnstormer on the main stage. Susan Aho, one third of the singing trio, was very taken with the British crowd. “The audience was so great, I was

actually surprised how easily British people got enthusiastic, I thought they would be more like Finnish audiences, warm up slowly.” Well, a rare compliment for the famously dancing-phobic Brits indeed, but it definitely reflects the unselfconscious and comfortable attitude that Wychwood generates, leading to some serious getting down to the music.

Mory Kanté, in his flowing white robes, contrasted wonderfully with the misty hills of the Cotswolds behind him – and the West African rhythms built up an appreciative communality amongst an audience initially divided between old fans and the uninitiated. Naturally, by the time his delicate, coaxing *kora* introduction to ‘Yéké Yéké’ exploded into the recognisable beat of that famous dancefloor classic, the masses were bobbing as one.

From there I dived seamlessly into the big top tent to find DJ Gilles Peterson spinning similar beats to a crowd of young and old. Peterson, a veteran of many a dance festival, appeared to smell something of the unreconstructed rave freedom to this happy gathering. “Somehow the

spirit was there,” he later remarked. A spirit that will be the key to the festival’s success if it is to stand out from the myriad major commercial ventures round the UK – from Glastonbury to WOMAD.

That spirit and vision is the brainchild of Graeme Merifield who set out to create a festival of local music from around the globe, and to bring it all to this corner of the Cotswolds. “My original vision was to build a music festival that featured world music in its broadest sense,” Merifield explains. “I’ve always felt that world music really is about the music at the heart of various communities around the world, and is a way we can enjoy, celebrate and have a greater understanding of the people we share this planet with.” And as well as seeking success and increasing numbers of festival-goers, Merifield is still mindful of the reasons many people gave up on the mud, sweat and tears of events like Glastonbury. “We want Wychwood to always remain an intimate experience and so will never let it grow to become an unwieldy festival where you get tired



Bollywood Brass Band – local music from around the globe





Clockwise from left: The main stage and the big top tent under apocalyptic skies, Wychwood 2005; feisty Finns Värttinä; Eliza Carthy feels the spirit; Mory Kanté moves the masses



beautiful backdrop of the Cotswold hills, the racecourse twisting around them – which is more than enough to relax the senses. This year's festival is already turning from spirit to reality – with confirmed names including Billy Bragg, folk's new wonder boy Seth Lakeman, violinist Sophie Solomon, Dreadzone and Eliza Carthy. And with murmurs about the likes of Amadou & Mariam and Martha Wainwright, it's definitely worth a flutter. **I**

This year's festival is June 2-4. For more information, check out www.wychwoodfestival.com Tel: 01242 227 979



just making your way from stage to stage," he assures. This gave Wychwood, in its first year, a distinctly child, and even granny-friendly feel, not unlike the Larmer Tree Festival in Dorset. All ages could involve themselves in all aspects of the event – a genuine community. And a wider community is at the forefront of the organisers' minds, with charities playing a major role in the event. The first year saw involvement from Oxfam, Greenpeace, Christian Aid and The Environmental Investigation Agency, from stewarding to bringing in speakers, showing films, campaigning and workshops. The festival gave £4,500 to Oxfam last year and intends that the money will grow with the festival.

The name Wychwood also has a history. It

seems a little unconnected when standing in Cheltenham racecourse, but as Merifield points out, we are actually standing close to the ancient Wychwood forests that used to cover west Oxfordshire. "Up until the 1850s, 40,000 would gather for a local festival [in the Wychwood forest]," explains Merifield, "until the landed gentry landowner stopped them coming onto his land so he could sell the oaks to the navy," a practice that saw the destruction of ancient forest across the UK in the heyday of the wooden ships that created the world's mightiest navy. Meanwhile, Merifield holds a vision for the future. "We hope to return the festival to Wychwood one day."

But for now we have the undeniably