

MUSIC REVIEW

A few surprises spice up Newport folk fest

By James Reed, Globe Staff | August 6, 2007

NEWPORT, R.I. -- The Newport Folk Festival just can't catch a break. When it goes out on a limb (with the Pixies unplugged), the purists grumble that it has sold out. When it stays true to its roots (with the Indigo Girls in yet another singalong of "Closer to Fine"), younger concertgoers decry the staid programming.

So this past weekend's festival at Fort Adams State Park played to both parties, striking a slightly lopsided balance heavy on standbys (Emmylou Harris and Alison Krauss & Union Station) over pleasant surprises (Alejandro Escovedo, Amos Lee, and the Carolina Chocolate Drops).

Apparently, folk is the new world music: Anything and everything can fall under its umbrella, from bluegrass (Ralph Stanley) to Southern rock (Allman Brothers Band) to jam bands (John Butler Trio and Assembly of Dust). But there was one notable omission: contemporary avant-folk performers popular with hipsters. (Note to producers: try to get Sufjan Stevens, Joanna Newsom, and/or Antony and the Johnsons next year.) As such, the festival looked and felt like its usual self, with a healthy (but not sold-out) crowd of wizened folkies mingling among the younger crowds.

Even though there were three other opening sets Saturday morning and Linda Ronstadt's concert the previous night, Martha Wainwright -- wiping her streaking mascara in the 90-degree heat -- launched the festival with a stellar performance.

Later, Wainwright joined her aunt Sloan Wainwright (whose regal voice could fell a redwood) and half-sister Lucy Wainwright Roche in a song circle that wrapped a pensive take on Hank Williams's "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." It left Harris nodding and mouthing the words as she sat quietly on the sidelines.

Along with her band, the Nocturnals, Grace Potter, towering four inches taller in white leather boots, sang and played as if her amps had gone out -- with force and conviction. (A nice breeze from the water kept her mascara -- and there was plenty of it -- from running.) Too bad they were playing to pockets of empty seats. But it was still early afternoon, and next up on the main Dunkin' Donuts Stage was the John Butler Trio, a spirited Australian band that got bronzed 20-somethings in flip-flops out of their seats to jam and dance to slogans disguised as song titles: "You Can Do Better Than That."

Tom Morello, armed with an acoustic guitar and performing as the Nightwatchman, conjured the fiery spirit of Newport's past as a forum on politics and protest. Exercising an obvious Dylan fetish, the Rage Against the Machine guitarist didn't perform as much as he riled up the crowd with his blunt songs that questioned (and took to task) the government, including its handling of post-Katrina New Orleans. "I pray that God himself will come and drown the president/ If the levees break again," he sang to fist-pumping applause on "Midnight in the City of Destruction."

On a lighter note, the MacKenzie Project, led by teenage Celtic fiddling sensation Roseanne MacKenzie, held a small crowd rapt with her sprightly playing and charming tales from home. "In Cape Breton, we're so tiny we have nothing else to do," she said of her love of square dancing.

By 5 p.m., the Allman Brothers Band, Saturday's headliners, had monopolized the crowd's attention with its signature Southern rock as slick and accomplished as many in the crowd must have remembered from 1969. With Derek Trucks and Warren Haynes on lead and slide guitars and Gregg Allman behind his Hammond B-3, the band tapped into something nearly spiritual for concertgoers. If you didn't know the lyrics, you just needed to listen to the guy with the graying ponytail next to you. He shouted *all* the words. Sunday's lineup was just as eclectic. Austin singer-songwriter Escovedo was the best of both worlds: a rocker who hasn't forgotten his punk origins but who now turns out graceful chamber-folk illuminated by swelling strings. Elvis Perkins in Dearland spun a set short on pomp and long on charm. As soon as he turned inward, he could just as quickly ratchet up again with a roving drummer riling up the crowd. "While You Were Sleeping" closed the set with one of the day's few -- and deserved -- standing ovations.

Next door, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, an African-American string band from North Carolina, were downright infectious with their down-home mix of jazz, blues, and gospel rooted in bygone eras. Playing fiddle, banjo, guitar, and a jug, they won over the audience and even danced the Charleston just to make sure.

Meanwhile, Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys played a master class on how you do bluegrass right. "I've been doing this for 61 years," the 80-year-old icon said. "Don't I look good?" Yes, but he sounded even better. As usual, Harris was resplendent in a set mostly of covers (Townes Van Zandt's "Pancho and Lefty" and Lucinda Williams's "Sweet Old World"). She turned the sprawling stage into a cozy setting with intimate accompaniment of mostly dobro, mandolin, guitar, and upright bass.

Harris's nearly a cappella version of "Callin' My Children Home" set the stage for headliners Alison Krauss & Union Station. As of deadline, Krauss and company (with special guest Jerry Douglas on dobro) played a delicate set shot through with Krauss's nightingale vocals. Even with the sun still shining, the performance felt dusky, with Krauss cooing "Ghost in this House," as if in synch with the little sailboats drifting by lazily in the distance.