

Chicago 2008: The Lollapalooza and Pitchfork Music Festivals

Political and musical perspectives

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Lollapalooza, August 1-3, Grant Park; The Pitchfork Music Festival, July 18-20, Union Park

Midsummer draws thousand upon thousands to Chicago for two music festivals: The Pitchfork Music Festival and Lollapalooza. For the last two years, the festivals have taken place on alternating weekends. Over the past weeks, such diverse acts as The National, Radiohead, The Kills, Fleet Foxes, Animal Collective, The Black Lips, King Khan and the Shrines, and The Ruby Suns have graced the city.

The festivals offer listeners the opportunity to sample music with which they are perhaps unfamiliar. In a larger sense, they provide younger members of the audience a chance to entertain a host of concepts and points of view that may challenge their accepted worldviews. Generally, the atmosphere is cooperative. There is often a sense of shared community that is welcome in comparison to the all-too-common alienation of work and school.

Both the Lollapalooza and Pitchfork festivals are a tribute to the partnership with the Chicago Park District. They serve as a trial run for the city's Olympics bid and show what a varied cultural fare a city can offer when it has sufficient funds with which to work. These are only a small portion of the services offered by the Park District. There is no such commitment from Democratic Mayor Richard Daley to other social welfare and education services for the city's residents.

Pitchfork Indy Media operates a web site dedicated to reviewing indie music. A favorable review from the site is enough to guarantee album success for the budding musician. The *Chicago Reader* (July 17, 2008) documented how the festival was the brainchild of jazz musician Mike Reid, who first pitched the idea to the site. One of the particular appeals of the festival is its second year of partnership with All Tomorrow's Party. Three bands are invited each year to perform classic albums in their entirety.

This year, one of the highlights was Public Enemy performing *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back*. From the beginning of the show, the booming bass and deep vocals of Chuck D shook the crowd. Everyone was jumping up and down to the legendary beats. Due to his reality television series, Flavor Flav may seem like a joke to some. But he left no doubts when he hit the stage that his jovial style is the perfect foil to Chuck D. In a sense, Flavor Flav provided the needed moderation to Chuck D's rhetoric.

Rapper Chuck D asserted that the politics of the album resonates even more today. During the 1980s when the album was released, Chuck D was subject to FBI phone bugging. On stage, Chuck D drew attention to the fact these same practices are taking place today under the Bush administration. At the same time, he declared that Republican John McCain would continue a thousand-year war. The implication was that an Obama administration would be different.

While the group's stage and musical presence is unquestioned, their politics is another matter: reactionary black nationalism, including support for Louis Farrakhan, and a great deal of social backwardness.

Mission of Burma made their second performance at Pitchfork. This time they were performing their album *Vs*. In 1983, the album showed a maturing of the band's sound. Roger Miller's guitar work had more bite than many of the contemporary acts. It hardly made the album sound dated; instead the audience was reminded of the significance of the band. With sweat dripping in the afternoon heat, they demonstrated they were still in command. Drummer Peter Prescott still played with a confident authority. And Clint Connelly's bass and vocals were totally inspired.

A great deal of interest came from the smaller Balance stage. This year it was placed in a shady corner of the park. It provided acts that veered off from the indie mainstream. Extra Golden incorporated Afro-beats into a more contemporary setting. Their lilting rhythms were fresh and uplifting. The Ruby Suns echoed the natural wilderness of their native New Zealand. Their sound combined new wave dance and psychedelics in pleasant songs. The two-piece band invited listeners into a place of gentle contemplation. High Places continued in the same vein. Also, a two-piece, they used electronics to create a sense of a meandering raga. Vocalist Mary Pearson's calming melodies were gradually hypnotic.

The psychedelic theme was carried over at one of the main stages by the Canadian band Caribou. Guitar lines floated in and out of the keyboard sounds. The songs built to a haunting intensity and then released the tension. When the band performs in a club setting, they have an amazing video show that adds to the sound's intensity. But their rousing performance more than made up for that omission.

M. Ward is presently touring with the actress Zooey Deschanel. He performed at Pitchfork with his band and demonstrated the diversity of his talents. His finger-picking guitar style showed a particular skill and complemented his country-flavored sound. His deeply affecting songs were the perfect warm up for Spiritualized.

Spiritualized singer-guitar player Jason Pierce reminded the Pitchfork audience that his experimental psychedelic sound has deep roots. With two exalting back-up singers, he invited the weary to a place of comfort and renewal. This no doubt reflected his own recovery from serious illness just before completion of his most recent album.

"Shine a Light" welcomed the audience to join the healing chorus. The concluding "Come Together" developed from just such an uplifting melody into a wall of feedback. The stage came alive as Jason incited the other musicians with his frenzied strumming of the guitar. As the song reaches its apex, he tossed the guitar in the air. Jason's appeal has always been his ability to give form to this chaos. His thanks to the audience captured the graciousness that characterized his entire appearance.

The performance of King Khan and the Shrines was greatly anticipated

by both the press and the crowd. The previous night he charmed an after-show party. With his shiny gold cape, he captured the flash of James Brown and Little Richard. He carried on the same tradition with the excited gestures to the audience so characteristic of classic rhythm and blues. His style was a touch of Bollywood mixed with dirty garage rock and nasty soul. The early part of the show seemed sheer genius. But he began to lose a major portion of the audience as he became too absorbed in showmanship and less attentive to the music.

King Khan's friends and Vice recording mates, The Black Lips, opened up Lollapalooza. Despite the hot sun and the early slot, they showed the Chicago audience why they are the up and coming thing. Less concerned with their former stage antics, their garage rock echoed the 1960s. But their version was entirely of the present, demonstrated by the loads of kids hopping up and down to songs such as "O Katrina" and "Dirty Hands."

The chorus of "Dirty Hands" perfectly reflects adolescent ambiguity, "Hands, do you really wanna hold my dirty hands." The Black Lips do not seem concerned with rock stardom. Instead, they are committed to the music and their crowd. They are not above making fun of themselves.

Lollapalooza is the brainchild of Jane's Addiction frontman Perry Farrell. From the touring festival of the 1990s, the festival more recently found a permanent home in Chicago. At this year's festival, he jumped on stage to introduce Love and Rockets as a band that he loved when he was kid.

The Toronto band Broken Social Scene appeared Saturday night just before Wilco. A number of indie bands now have a large number of players. Kevin Drew invites all his musical friends to performances of Broken Social Scene. For the Lollapalooza show, Amy Millan, from the Montreal-based Stars, did lead vocals on some of the songs. Brendan Canning is one of the mainstays of the group. His new song "Love is New" captures a danceable flavor reminiscent of Talking Heads. All the members get in the act and sing along. The large presence on the stage inspires audience participation so that everyone becomes part of Broken Social Scene.

Margot and the Nuclear So and Sos follow the same formula as Broken Social Scene and The Arcade Fire. At Lollapalooza there were eight members performing. Although he is not a core member, Erik Kang did work on pedal steel and violin that was particularly remarkable. He complemented the guitar work of Andy Fry well, and his melancholy sounds provided a strong basis for the haunting vocals of songwriter Richard Edwards.

In "Quiet as a Mouse" the band chronicled an epic tale: "You can hide as quiet as a mouse, but they'll find you out." The song built to a series of anthemic choruses: "When I awoke my back was broken on the floor." The portrait became more complex: "He was draft-dodging some war until they found him out." Edwards returned to the provocative chorus "Wake up; the sun is rising without you." "Skeleton Key" developed from a romantic longing that characterized most of Edwards's songs. The song was propelled by the percussive work of Casey Tennis.

The National appeared just before Nine Inch Nails. It was a pleasant performance, but not as quite as dramatic as their show at Bonnaroo a year ago. Singer Matt Berninger indicated that the song "Mr. November," written year before, was not referring to Sen. John McCain. This was despite the evocative lines: "I'm the great white hope; I'm the new blue blood."

A potential appearance by Barack Obama seemed to overshadow the hoopla for the various performing bands. Festival goers helped perpetuate the rumors. Even though the candidate did not show, the myth seemed to float above the festival site. Rage Against the Machine singer Zack de La Rocha jumped into the fray with his onstage remarks: "Now, we know Brother Obama. ... But I tell you what, if he comes to power come November and he doesn't start pulling troops out of Afghanistan, I know a lot of people who are gonna stand up and burn down every office of

every senator."

Despite the supposed effort of the band to advance a radical politics, they too seemed taken in by the Obama phenomenon. Other bands seemed even more accepting. Bloc Party singer Kele Okereke wore a big Obama t-shirt with the word "progress" on it. This was particularly significant as a massive crowd watched Bloc Party right before the Friday headliner Radiohead. Both Okereke and Broken Social Scene Kevin Drew described how the world was depending on American voters to elect Obama.

Not known for speaking a great deal at shows, Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke avoided an endorsement from the stage. Nevertheless, a Tibetan flag draped from one of the keyboards indicated the band's stance. Radiohead called one of their albums *Hail to the Thief* as a response to the 2000 U.S. presidential election.

In 2006, Yorke turned down a meeting with Tony Blair to protest the former prime minister's actions on both the environment and Iraq. Later in August of the same year, his web site noted, "We must throw Tony Blair out of office NOW."

For its Lollapalooza show, the band used the music to do the talking for them. "No Surprises" lulled the audience with its gentle tones. In one of the most dramatic moments, fireworks went off in the distance as the band reached the climax of "Everything in Its Right Place." The vivid drama was followed by the acoustic guitars of "Fake Plastic Trees." One of Radiohead's early singles, the song offered such an effective portrayal of the empty pursuit of commercialism.

Encore number, "Paranoid Android," also reflected a contemporary alienation where the victim is caught in the same patterns of violence as his oppressor, "When I am king, you will be first against the wall/With your opinion which is of no consequence at all." In the serenity of Grant Park, Radiohead showcased the varied styles that have made them such an influential band.

Despite the great performance, Radiohead's dilemma is like so many indie bands. At a time when economic mobility seems so restricted, the music industry offers the illusion that listener choice is equivalent to actual individual freedom. The preponderance of new bands and innovative sounds invite the audience to think about the possibility of political change. Lollapalooza and The Pitchfork Festival appear to beckon the participants to the Promised Land. This adds to the burden on the musicians. What would genuine musical and political independence look like?

Death Cab for Cutie, The Decembrists, and The Arcade Fire achieved success at a time when US military action in Iraq was becoming widely unpopular. For the young, music was a factor in helping them formulate a politics that reflected their actual frustrations. The bands recognized the need to realize their message in a concrete way. But much of the political discontent was channeled into Democratic Party candidate John Kerry's campaign for president in 2004. This helped, in fact, to *increase* the political disorientation and disenchantment among young voters. Many of the same indie artists now encourage voters to hop on board the Obama bandwagon.



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