

WOMAD REVIEW - BY JANE CORNWELL

Big iridescent bubbles blew over the rural Wiltshire landscape this festival weekend. Conjured with wands, deployed by kids and adults, they floated across stages filled with artists from Australia to Zimbabwe; through an arboretum strung with dream catchers and fairy lights; past an old-fashioned Steam Fair and a Global Village selling noodles and tutus, hammocks and tie-dyes, parasols and wellies. Glinting in the sunshine on Friday and Saturday they had gently faded out by Sunday. But the Womad spirit remained undampened

'There were discoveries from every global corner,' noted The Independent. 'As usual, the festival's strength lay in brief, startling contact with music further off the track even than Timbuktu.' The Times welcomed WOMAD and some 30,000 punters back to the idyllic Charlton Park for this, its third year ('The weekend's family-friendly atmosphere felt as Utopian as ever'), while the Guardian praised a festival whose highlights 'provided further reminders that "world music" really is global these days, and increasingly experimental.'



Take Thursday, for instance. Early arrivals were privy to an innovative collaborative project on the main Open Air Stage between students of schools in nearby Malmesbury, Colores De Mi Tierra - an extended family of musicians and dancers from Colombia's Caribbean coast - and celebrated UK beatboxer, Shlomo. As openers go, it doesn't get much more experimental than that. Ska legends The Skatalites then had those who were there skanking into the night; 'awesome', agreed two young bar staff, their faces painted blue (as were many faces) as part of Oxfam's Go Blue in the Face Climate Change Campaign.

Friday dawned fair, with down-dogs and sun salutations spilling out of the Yogatree session in the All Singing All Dancing tent and the ubiquitous Womad flags undulating in the summer breeze. Grouped by colour and design - oblong white flags; pastel flags with circles; flags with dark, dramatic chevrons - they stood sentinel over Charlton Park, marking out a temporary magical republic. Their creator Angus Watt strode anonymously among them. "Yeah, they're looking good," he said with a grin, shielding his eyes from the sun.

African sounds rolled us into the day: a djembe drum workshop from Guinea's Nansady Keita vied with the bluesy, folksy, occasionally Latin vibe of the Burkina Faso singer-songwriter, Victor Démé. Tucked away in the arboretum, the BBC Radio 3 Stage showcased the agile acoustic guitar picking of London-based Malagasy player and frequent African music collaborator Nogabe Randriaharimalala (trying saying that after a cheeky lunchtime cider). Black-robed Saharawi songstress Mariem Hassan sang her raspy stories of resistance on the main stage as her band fired electric guitar riffs into the ether.

Dub Colossus took possession of the Red Tent with their mighty blend of Sixties-style Ethiojazz/pop and Seventies Jamaican dub reggae. Buoyed by choppy keyboards, stirring bass lines and fervent, mesmerising vocals, this was a set with humour, colour and passion. With founder Nick 'Count Dubulah' Page overseeing proceedings from behind his low-slung bass and Teremage Woretaw wielding his one-string mesengo fiddle like some Addis-based Paganini, tracks from the critically acclaimed debut A Town Like Addis came vibrantly to life. "Jump!" ordered a bare-shouldered female singer, and we did.



PHOTOGRAPH BY: YORK TILLER

Rokia Traoré's performance on the mains stage vindicated her Best Artist gong in the inaugural Songlines Music Awards. Dressed in a clingy white jumpsuit, backed by a band on drums, ngoni lute and guitars (notably Christophe Minke on bass), the Malian diplomat's daughter scat-sang Gershwin's *The Man I Love* ("That was an African tribute to Billie Holiday"), danced like a disco diva and played her warm-toned Gretsch guitar. Way over the other side of the site, Mariem Hassan was cooking up desert delights in the Taste the World tent.



PHOTOGRAPH BY: YORK TILLER

Having given a workshop on the Saddlespan Stage earlier that afternoon, indigenous Australian performers Shellie Morris and Mark Atkins joined the sprawling supergroup The Black Arm Band in the Siam Tent. There, before a backdrop of powerful and damning archive footage and to backing from strings, horns and piano courtesy of UK-bandleader Alex Wilson, some of Australia's best-loved artists delivered a history of Aboriginal folk protest song. "This is what it's like to live in the two worlds of Australia," said narrator Peter Rotumah, introducing a show that spanned country, rock, jazz, reggae and didgeridoo and moved a packed crowd from tears to cheers.

Drenched in bling, preacher/singer/legend Solomon Burke sat on his throne on the Open Air Stage and invited people up to dance; his rendition of Sam Cooke's civil right masterpiece *A Change Is Gonna Come* was both poignant and suitably kingly. Percussion-heavy four piece and Mercury Music Prize nominees The Portico Quartet created sublime late night soundscapes in the Siam Tent, spellbinding all with their trademark, steel-drum-like hang and spiralling alto-sax excursions. Cult Paris-based Moroccan chanteuse Hindi Zahra confirmed next-big-thing rumours with a memorable mix of Berber, hip hop and tango and a voice that brought the stars out.



Saturday saw the turban bedecked Dhoad Gypsies of Rajasthan singing otherworldly scales accompanied by harmonium and tabla - and succeeding, for the most part, in getting their audiences to do the same. New Chinagrass sensation Mamer delivered songs rooted in the traditional Kazak music of his homeland; head-nodding, toe-tapping songs (as heard on his much-praised debut, *Eagle*) that fused Western folk and rock with some astonishing guitar work; the bubble-crazy punters down the front at Spiro helped make this oh-so-English Bristol quartet (performing acoustic tunes from their wonderful *Lightbox* album) even more enchanting.

Azerbaijani star Gochag Askerov let rip on the Radio 3 stage with vocals that recalled the late, great Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and marked him as one of the voices of the weekend. There was coolly experimental stuff from Peruvian outfit Radiokidjada, a former studio project featuring unobtrusive programming by Christoph H Müller of France's Gotan Project; skilfully deployed percussion (on a donkey's jawbone, and even on his own face) by Rodolfo Muñoz; and gorgeous vocals from Angelina Maria Fontana. "Music has no boundaries," she said between cool, celebratory songs, reaffirming a basic WOMAD precept.

Elsewhere, New York's Hypnotic Brass Ensemble lived up to their name with a funky, soulful set that was part marching band, part hip-hop convention. Malian diva Oumou Sangaré mesmerised, as she always does, with her charismatic presence, glorious voice and jittery Wassoulou rhythms. There were antics galore from Cuban b-boys Orishas, who sang of revolution and love between percussion solos, well-oiled choreography and scaling the Siam stage's scaffolding.



Thousands gathered to watch WOMAD founder Peter Gabriel deliver a majestic performance on Saturday evening in aid of the human rights charity Witness.org. With orchestral support from John Metcalfe and The Bus Stop Strings and occasional lead vocals from daughter Melanie, an avuncular Gabriel paced the stage before a backdrop of multi-media images and delivered songs from the *Scratch My Back* project (including, ironically, Paul Simon's

Boy in the Bubble) and hits such as Steam and the anthemic Biko. Gigantic bubbles continued to sail over the crowd. But here, too, were flame-driven sky lanterns; drifting up and into the night, trailing optimism.

The wellies were out in force on Sunday, stomping along to a rousing version of Down On The Bayou by Sarah Savoy and the Francadians (think Stetsons, checked shirts and a female lead singer with a black pompadour and a red dress); pogo-ing to incendiary Spanglish ska of Barcelona five-piece Che Sudaka; grooving to the cabaret-fuelled balladry of the soon-to-be-big Charlie Winston (think a cross between Robert Downey Junior, Jacques Brel and Rufus Wainwright, then grab a copy of his current album Hobo) and the sparkling sounds of Malian virtuoso Ba Cissoko and his 21-string kora harp.

Argentinean tango hero-come-punk poet Melingo slunk about the Siam Tent stage in dark glasses, blasting a clarinet here, a Tom Waits-style vocal there and then, er, took off his shoe and talked into it. Berlin outfit 17 Hippies gave us an Eastern European mash-up complete with silly dancing, theatrics and euphonium; Tel Aviv's funky, jazzy The Apples were joined in the Big Red Tent by Johnny Kalsi, that venue's MC, on pounding Indian dhol drum. Then as the skies opened in the evening the great Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour took to the main stage - and showed exactly why he is the legend he is.

Supported by tight-knit long-time band Super Etoile de Dakar, N'Dour veered from the upbeat, electro-acoustic mbalax rhythms that underpin his sound to ballads (Li Ma Weesu, Birima) that showcased his celebrated voice. After a speech about tackling malaria, a 'positive' anthem New Africa and a brief a capella reworking of Seven Seconds, N'Dour stopped to recall the first time he played WOMAD some twenty-odd years ago.

"Back then we came together to celebrate diversity and music from different parts of the world," he said. "And that," he added to cheers, "is what we call world music."

Two decades on, WOMAD is as vital and relevant as ever.

Jane Cornwell