

WOMAD 2009

Day 1 @ Charlton Park, Wiltshire, 24 July 2009

WOMAD: Solomon Burke

(Photo: Stefan Simanowitz) WOMAD 2009: Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3



Revellers at this year's 27th WOMAD festival, traditionally a family-friendly favourite of alternative lifestylers and world music fans, were taken aback to see Prince Harry sauntering across the immaculate grounds of Charlton Park. Wearing a green woolly beanie, the third-in-line to the throne was spotted mixing with the crowds before being stopped in his tracks by the voice of Western Saharan singer, Mariem Hassan, which soared through the warm afternoon air.

Hassan started her set with a 'mawal', a graceful song sung without accompaniment before moving on to the mesmeric desert blues for which she is famed. She sang of love, of heartache but most of all she sang of the suffering and hopes of her people in their struggle for independence in Africa's last colony.

Her sound is steeped in the Saharawi/Hassania traditions, fusing the traditional rhythmic 'haul' with blues and rock and accompanied by the tebal, a goatskin drum and electric guitar. Hassan's earthy rippling rhythms start slowly and intensify, lifting the spirit and penetrating the bone.

The next act on the open air stage was the stunning Malian songwriter and guitarist Rokia Traoré who got the crowd jumping with an energetic set which blended traditional African rhythms with funky electric guitars and complex vocal harmonies. She richly deserved the inaugural Songlines Best Artist gong awarded to her at the end of her set.

Meanwhile in a wooded glade in a quiet corner of the festival, Grammy-nominated Colombian band Cimarrón performed on the BBC Radio 3 stage. Hailing from the cattle plains of Orinoco, this Stetson-wearing, bandola-picking, harp-strumming group were quick to get an appreciative audience dancing to their fiery 'turboflamencojazz'.

As their name suggests, The Black Arm Band had not come to WOMAD just for the fun of it. Described as "part Aboriginal soul revue, part civil rights statement", this 32-piece ensemble is a collective of some of Australia's best indigenous musicians. Backed by the ever-present didgeridoo, their sound ranges from rootsy reggae anthems to sensual Aboriginal spirituals which spread waves of goose pimples through the crowd.

The first day was wrapped up by soul legend Solomon Burke. Wheelchair-bound and clinically obese, he showed that he still had what it takes, oozing charm as he crooned his way through a set consisting of solid-gold classics. Whilst not as instantly recognisable as his protégés Sam Cooke and Otis Redding, Burke is one of the architects of American soul music. He packed his already crowded stage with dancing members of the audience as he sang his way through songs including such classics as Everybody Needs Somebody to Love, Don't Give Up On Me, Diamond In Your Mind and the Sam Cooke classic A Change Is Gonna Come. As his show reached a climax he breathed to the crowd, "I'm feeling so much love for you right now." The feeling was mutual.

Sadly by this time Prince Harry was no longer in the audience. Perhaps he'd chosen instead to spend much of his time at WOMAD in the Pink Flamingo, a cocktail tent backstage. Perhaps he was worried about being pestered by hippies. Whatever the reason, there's no doubt that the loss was his.

- Stefan Simanowitz