

Fields In Heels

Tales of a festival virgin. Well, you know what we mean... Stella Washburn experiences her first Womad. With photos by Judith Burrows, an old hand...

I've lived in this country for nearly thirty years and yet despite total, dedicated enthusiasm for all things English – folk and morris dancers in particular – it seems I've still not fully sampled all the delights that summer here has to offer. Surprisingly perhaps, given that I've worked for this magazine for what seems like forever, I've never 'til now been to Womad. This is possibly because for as long as I can remember Womad has always fallen in between Glastonbury and Sidmouth and it's always taken that time for me to recover sufficiently from the former (I do like to do things properly), to be able to walk around the latter. Besides it was always in Reading, which reminds me of some of the more bleak areas of Detroit and reason enough not to go.

Inexplicably my Glastonbury was rather quiet this year, so when my good friend Derek asked me to accompany him to the World Of Music And Dance – "Oh, for fuck's sake Stella, you can't have forgotten! It's not in a dreary municipal field any more, we're talking the sweeping grounds of a stately home, the sort of place you'd normally bend over backwards to spend a weekend in. And, let's face it, often have," (a bit below the belt I thought) – and then promised to drive there and back, take me to the world's coolest bar and to let me smoke in the car, I agreed.

It was a lovely morning when D picked me up. And a lovely drive so I didn't mind that he made me sit with the window open. I took roll-ups. I had the feeling proper fags would be even more frowned upon. When we got there the site was basking in warm sunshine. The crowd looked pretty egalitarian and as we wandered the elysian fields we noted several people who were definitely, reassuringly upper class. Reassuring because in my experience the upper classes don't care about the whys and wherefores or question the order of things. At ease with their sense of entitlement, they're free to really care about having a good time. And this is something they do very well (excellently, thank you, in some cases – you know who you are). So it boded well. I'm sure I spotted the 'spare' to the throne amongst a Hunter clad crowd successfully making the most of the backstage bar, our first stop for precautionary drinks before taking in the sights.

The event is perfectly bijou compared to Glastonbury, but where Glastonbury (at least the bits where I go), is all designer clad festival-chic, Womad is very much about hemp 'tailoring', the appeal of

which I have to say is beyond me. I mean, it's not political. It really is just poor taste.

At Glastonbury the best naked action requires a special laminate, but here a couple of people in just their underwear were running a stall, selling pants to save the world. Good they had the weather for it. I didn't miss having access to the artists' area (a firm no), as it can get so tiresomely complicated trying to remember names and faces and exactly what happened when.

Happily D wasn't keen on the extensive (stripey-jumper) shopping opportunities. He confined himself to excited excursions to the food stalls and the bars. I was surprised that such a slim man could eat a family plate of Thai noodles only minutes after a gargantuan Goan fish curry in what was really only a short pause between pints of beer. I stuck to spirits, having taken the precaution of bringing my own vermouth, which perked up the vodka no end. Makeshift martinis, but better than none. I dissuaded D from a whirl on the attractions provided by Carter's Steam Fair, so we saw a lot of music and not a repeat of lunch.

You wouldn't think pebble-thick glasses and the shambling physique of an over-50-year-old could be even slightly alluring, but Daniel Waro with his wild hair, transcendental harmonies and polyrhythmic percussion proved otherwise. I've never had the slightest inclination to go to La Réunion, but now know that a return flight on British Airways at the end of September is £3,354.23.

It would, I suppose, be more within my budget to go to Southern Italy and catch up with the gorgeous Nidi D'Arac, whose thrilling leather-trousered Clash-inspired taranta pizzica reminded me joyfully of folk music's punk aesthetic and nights I can't fully remember at CGB's. The handsome, firm-looking Mediterraneans have taken their traditional music, melded it with modern influences and made it all brilliantly relevant, but I wonder if Réunion might, in the end be worth the money.

Rambles to His Lordship's arboretum – past some marvellous sounding alternative therapy tents – and to the Radio 3 stage nestling in a leafy glade, revealed the excellent Abigail Washburn (no relation, as far as I know, but I have a complicated family tree) and Kai Welch. It was a pleasure to see the excellent Lucy Duran broadcast her Saturday afternoon show there and guest Susheela Raman looked lovely but I don't think that was any reason for certain elements in the crowd to be so rude about me refusing to sit. I didn't want grass stains on

my Stella McCartney mini (white with flower print and dry clean only) and anyway as my legs are long and I was in my 4" heel Louboutin mules, I'd never have squeezed in. Later we stood at the back to see World Circuit's newest star, the beautiful and utterly engaging Fatoumata Diawara, turn in a stomping set. D protested as I dragged him away, but I couldn't stay for it all. It's incredibly irritating to be confronted by so much collagen.

I'd already been reminded enough of this by the equally annoyingly beautiful fado singer Ana Moura, rather showing off I thought in a black sequined sheath. She turned the vastness of the packed Siam tent into an intimate club and a slack-jawed man next to me (not Derek, he was kindly queuing at the bar) sighed: "Her voice has pierced my soul. It's as if she's singing just to me." Pathetic really. Still, Moura's young and being Iberian will probably turn to fat.

Elsewhere there were fleeting trips (I'm surprisingly fast in high heels) to the gorgeous Arthur Jeffes and his Penguin Café and a bit of a rest at Anda Union (I love sequence music and throat singing in possibly equal measure), and there was a gratifying amount of throbby bass dub-reggae and blasting horns at any given time.

There were loads of workshops and cookery demonstrations. It was exhausting just reading about them at the bar, although Derek suggested I might show the "Young Dancers and Acrobats from Orissa" a thing or two. It was a relief when we got to flop into one of the intriguingly stained but oh-so-comfortable sofas in Soli's bar. D is right. It is cool. Uber-cool. Cooler even than Basil's Bar (Mustique, darling). Soli's is overseen by the inimitable and very striking Solomon himself and his place is decked out with prints of covetable rare and classic soul, funk and reggae album covers. Music of the same pounds out a fabulous sound track to some serious relaxing. And here, happily, I found smoking isn't at all frowned upon and roll-ups positively encouraged.

Soli's was located behind the Charlie Gillett stage. I was glad to see the great man remembered here. Though it's difficult to imagine having a better time I wish I'd made it to Womad when he was here. He was always good to talk to, even though we never agreed on folk or morris dancing, but then he probably didn't know the performers as well as I do. I'm sure, however, he knew many from other parts of the world that I'd now like to know better. I look forward to Womad 2012.



Clockwise from above: Susheela Raman, Ana Moura, Nidi D'Arac, Danyel Waro, Anda Union, Pants To Poverty.

