

Brainwashed - Wolf Eyes and Autechre live at Version Festival - the other music

Written by Scott Mckeating

Saturday, 30 July 2005 13:32 - Last Updated Saturday, 30 July 2005 13:35

8 -10 July @ ms Stubnitz, Quayside, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK Whoever had the idea to send a German WWII boat (the ms Stubnitz) around Europe to end up hosting three days worth of high profile and local experimental music in Newcastle Upon Tyne needs to be given some sort of peacetime medal. Being internationally renowned for beer and football, the burgeoning scene in the area has long been overlooked and acts are reaching unseen peaks of potential simply because about thirty years ago it was 'Grim up North'. Having Autechre headline the Friday guaranteed an early sell out and

many heads in attendance for opening Newcastle act Cathode (Steve Jefferis) whose corporeal manoeuvring of beats gelled magnificently with the manipulation of vocal lines and cloud obscured tunes. Any fears about the quality of non internationally awesomely famous acts were put straight to bed with his set. Monolake's one man show may have been the first to inspire some 'I don't care who is watching' dancing and have had a smart looking projection but the music lacked a light and an involving energy that Cathode had shown us was possible in the boat's upper venue belly. Pixel's minimal banging works on record (I've heard it post performance and quite enjoyed its subtle shifts) but live the intricate reallocations of percussive sound and bleep were too tiny to really focus on. The sound system seemed to display every other artist's minute tweak but Pixel's performance was one dimensional tribal thumping. Plus he wore a ridiculous yellow cagoule. Autechre's day closing show in the very pit of the boat was played in near darkness; lit only by occasional flash photos, the glow of their spliff and the glare of their machinery. It took them about five minutes or so of an awful bass drum pattern to finally hit their stride revealing so clearly their Hip-Hop and Drum and Bass roots. Abstract, arrhythmic, funky hard; a hybrid of the history of dance music with absolutely no concessions to the dance floor massive.

With the early Saturday stint I managed to miss all of D_RRadio and most of Andrew Hodson's (pop Seefeel?) set listening to Jazzfinger's first-rate all day DJ session (shame they couldn't have played instead), drinking lovely German beer and tomato juice (not in the same glass). Things peaked rapidly with A Hawk and a Hacksaw's Accordion breath of fresh acoustic air performance and it was undoubtedly the best received set. Clashing American Folk, Klezmer, Romanian / Middle Eastern amalgams and balladeering he played a skilful one man percussion with drumsticks on his hat and knee and well as foot pedal drums. Their set (he was accompanied by a capable fiddle player) was an unexpected highlight of the festival and especially from a man who looked like an Amish serial killer. I don't know what problems Stars as Eyes had experienced before they arrived onstage but the excuse they mumbled to the audience for their total lack of preparation was something to do with George Bush and a time machine. Songs were cut short and the gaps between these fumbblings became longer and more awkward and in the end they just sat on the floor behind their gear to muted applause. Afternoon headliner

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Fennesz turned his normal style on its head and played a Morricone widescreen set of his timid ambience but burned by walls of hectic guitar noise burrowing the elaborate soft melodies under washes of hard to decipher sound; interesting but unexpected.

Saturday's late set technoed me out pretty early on as Quinoline Yellow's BoC / Aphex set was average sub Warp material. The highlight of the laptop dullness was next act Chris Clark bum rushing the stage to set up his equipment as QY continued to play, presumably, overrunning his allotted time. Clark certainly appealed to a good portion of the audience encouraging the most dancing of the weekend, but it definitely sounded a little repetitive from where I was sitting (yeah, I sat down that's how much it moved me). The summer sun's residue and the heat within the venue was beginning to become slightly uncomfortable as Pan Sonic hit the stage and gave the audience a mild digital TG Finnish banging. The beats and precise circuit board scarring shook not only the ship but my dehydrated tipsy head and I bowed out of the day completely missing headliner Scion.

If Saturday night's line-up had been for the techno heads and their shuffling feet then Sunday afternoon's was for the more eclectic listener. Alasdair Roberts and band hushed the venue with their pumped up utterly compelling and captivating folk narratives which was about a total 360 turn from the previous nights output. Vocally much richer and with a much thicker regional accent than on vinyl he brought these old tunes back to life for the electronic generation. I wasn't alone in never having heard of Tunng before their set and I wasn't alone in buying their album straight after the set either. With a heavier emphasis on the folk than the tronica they mingled melody, harmonies, handclaps, The Wicker Man and sea samples with a range of instrumentation to produce something very extraordinary and involving.

An outstanding Bloc Party cover ("Pioneers") rounded the show off in style which they refused to name or identify for the curious post gig congratulators. Even hardcore Khonnor fans thought his set was bizarre bordering on the shite, expecting laptop shoegazing we were instead treated to Rupert the one eyed Bear and Dick Turpin performing a dirty distorted and frankly wank version of his LP. Where "Handwriting" has a budding hazy sound here we were forced to listen to some teenager showing off and singing about spicy sausage, chest hair and his mother's vagina. No, seriously.

Battles commandeered the basement (do boats have basements?) and I was privileged to witness an outstanding performance of one of the best drummers I have ever seen. John Stanier's engine room drumming was powerfully gargantuan yet lean and sharp to easily turn corners into

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100mph tempo changes through funk, punk and dance. The rest of the band seemed to be looking to him for cues but how he had the time to do anything other than punish the kit in 1000 different ways is beyond me.

The reason I got a ticket to the festival were sitting two feet from me on the Stubnitz's top deck; Wolf Eyes. Looking like doom metal redneck survivalists (yellow lensed shooter glasses, camouflage and band patches) their live show truly proved that their brand of noise metal places them in a category of their own while the imitators continue to build in number. Hilariously macho, deafeningly loud and aggressive beyond all reasonable expectations they damaged equipment and skated on the edge of no control via Carcass mics, gongs, suitcases of broken wires and detuned white noise guitar. With Aaron Dilloway taking time out from the band due to dubious commitments he was replaced by metal head Mike Connelly who proved himself handy at scraping metal, guitar and black boxes creating the apparently "ultra-gnarly Phaze 4" of Wolf Eyes. My recent seduction by noise music was totally vindicated by their performance and if I could afford to keep up with their ridiculous release pace I'd be up there with their biggest supporters.

Where else can you get Wolf Eyes, sunshine, tofu chilli and ginger beer / tequila?