



## GUILFEST 2005 REVIEW

Guilfest

Photo by Nigel Crane

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The fourteenth annual Guilford Festival, or Guilfest as it's now been dubbed, has come a long way from humble beginnings. It started as a single evening of folk and blues, and has grown over the years, and now stretches over an entire weekend as one of the larger, if less well known, British open-air festivals. Promoter Tony Scott has created a family friendly event, with line-ups so diverse, the juxtaposition of bands on the bill is often enough to raise a wry smirk.

Though the festival offers five stages, the majority of noteworthy acts were to be found on either the main Radio 2 stage, or on Uncut's own noble dais, making the journey between the two a somewhat exhausting exercise in crowd negotiation. However, it was on the Radio 2 stage where the proceedings got off to a buoyant start, This Is Seb Clarke wooing the crowd from their su-induced torpor with their elastic concoction of 60s' beat music, punk and ska. Clarke himself howled away like a northern Joe Strummer, stomping around with a manic look and attempting to energise his audience via some kind of osmosis. The good time atmosphere of the songs, and genuine elation of the band (all twelve of them), by passed the need for any weighty content, which was fortunate as "Now You Know Who I Am", their introductory anthem, was about as deep as it got.

Afternoon ebbed into evening, and Portland's Richmond Fontaine provided the intimate and intricate lyricism that was decidedly lacking from Seb Clarke's set. Singer/songwriter Willy Vlautin's greatest talent is his extraordinary ability to evoke, in the form usually of brief, beautifully observed songs, a depth of character and complexity of situation usually associated with the best kind of contemporary American literature and story-telling. Nowhere have these abilities been better displayed, than on their most recent release The Fitzgerald, the record they've been promoting with a mini-tour of the UK. This has obviously stood them in good stead, the band exuding a subtle confidence, their performance being all about song craft as opposed to theatrics.

With the bulk of the evening's material coming from The Fitzgerald, it was fascinating to see the band rework what is, essentially, an austere acoustic album. Songs such as "Warehouse Life" could easily have surrendered some of their chilling ambience to intrusive, wayward playing, but this was never the case, each member contributing with exceptional taste and control, working as a unit to bring the songs to life.

The Pogues couldn't have played anywhere else but the top of the bill -not just because their legendary status, but also because playing last allowed the crowd enough time at the bar to enjoy their reeling jigs and heartfelt ballads in an appropriately convivial mood. With all key members on board - including Spider Stacy, Phillip Chevron and the infamous Shane McGowan - The Pogues took the stage and launched themselves head first into kerosene-fuelled versions of classics like "Tuesday Morning" and "Streams Of Whiskey", a sharp reminder of why folk music, played with punk attitude, has all the incendiary force of its spiky-haired sibling.

Since his original departure from the fold in 1991, Shane has never been able to fully sever his ties with the group, returning a decade later for Christmas shows and again in 2004, these gigs apparently inspiring a renewed - ahem - thirst for performance. Shane's performance on this occasion was captivating, in a very literal sense. Try as you might to avert your gaze from this wreck of a man, a man that in all other walks of life would surely have been written off an age ago, he remains the most interesting thing on stage. Blind drunk, disheveled and absolutely incoherent, his between song spiels should have come with subtitles. His stumbling delivery and whisky soaked inflections were sublime in their folly, and on the numbers that Chevron sang in his absence (presumably exiting to refresh his glass), his uniquely exuberant presence was sorely missed.

Saturday saw the crowds swell and the heat intensify. The sun was so much a presence, that Songdog's Lyndon Morgans felt compelled to apologise to those gathered around the Uncut stage, for subjecting them to his "depressing" music on such a glorious day. Opening with "One Day When God Began My Forgiveness", this apology immediately seemed unnecessary, a stoic wit marbling its reflective, nostalgic overtones. The kitchen-sink rawness of his words, combined with the minimalist arrangements, made for a formidable live experience, proving that the meditative atmosphere of their new album, The Time of Summer Lightning, can be transposed to the live arena.

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On the Radio 2 stage, Dubliner's Hal leaved off rock solid renditions of their breezy, harmony laydened pop. This trio are fantastically tight live, not only instrumentally but vocally, which goes some way to distinguish them from analogous groups such as the Thrills and The Magic Numbers. The upbeat, melodies of "I Sat Down" and "Only Live In Hope" made them stand out songs - although their many, all too similar, ballads tended to blur into one another.

Throughout the day and into the evening, acts couldn't help but refer to Paul Weller's imminent appearance. It became so common, that the phrase "Are you looking forward to Weller?" seemed as generic a comment as "Are you having a good time!". When he finally strutted onto the stage like a cocksure schoolboy, he didn't disappoint, and the mounting anticipation was fully justified. Amazingly, his youthful exuberance seemed to increase throughout the hour and a half long set, which consisted largely of crowd pleasers from his solo repertoire, like "Changing Man" and "Peacock Suit". His guitar partnership with Steve Craddock (of Ocean Color Scene fame) seems an organic, unforced affair, both visually and aurally. The two play around each other as though it were second nature, and Craddock's understated demeanor is the perfect counterpoint to Weller's live wire antics. Even when the mood was mellowed by a short acoustic interlude (the highlight of which was a superb "That's Entertainment"), the modfather's grimace and dancing shoulders, betrayed his discomfort at being seated. This apparently becoming too much, he rose with his guitar tucked under his arm, grooving his way down the stage, before returning to his seat just in time to sing the next verse.

As he's aged, Weller's voice has attained a soulful quality that wasn't present during his formative years with The Jam, and despite battling faulty monitors, he sang with an emotive power that was beyond reproach. There was, however, a reminder of his original, crude charm, on his forthcoming single "From The Floor Boards Up", Weller spitting out the song's chorus with a vintage aggression that also fuelled the closing version of Jam favourite "A Town Called Malice".

With a line-up including Lulu and Daniel Beddingfield, Sunday did not seem promising, the bill being heavily weighted with novelty acts and sundry dubious characters. The Zombies offered a ray of hope early in the afternoon, with Colin Blunstone's still-distinctive vocals and Rod Argent on keyboards as flamboyant as ever. Unfortunately, this wasn't enough to save them from the aging muso clichés they've become. It wasn't until later, when Willard Grant Conspiracy ambled onto the Uncut stage, that the day was truly redeemed.

There was a brief moment of *déjà vu* when main man Robert Fisher made the same apology about playing "depressing" music that Lyndon Morgans had the previous day, only this time, there were heckles demanding "happy songs". These were playfully rebuffed, Fisher cheerfully introducing the first song with the happy sentiment: "Well, this one's about suicide". The group sounded more vigorous live than I expected, their sound pivoted on the heavy reverb of David Curry's viola and John Apt's atmospheric guitar work. The pair created sonic sound-scapes around Fisher's often tragic, timeless folk songs. Tearing through numbers like "Sticky", which sound comparatively tame on record, the band also set aside time for their more lo-fi leanings. With the reverb off the viola and the bass guitar swapped for a double bass, the band gave sensitive performances of "The Ghost Of The Girl In The Well", and ended with the chilling "Ballad of John Parker". They were, perhaps, the pinnacle of the weekend, and were at very least, the best thing Sunday had to offer.