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WHAT IS MUSIC?

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What is Music?

WHAT IS MUSIC? FESTIVAL 4th - 8th April 1997, Punters Club, Melbourne

Somehow or other, Oren from Phlegm has managed to convince the Australian Arts Council over the last few years to support this event. Exactly *how* still remains a mystery, but whatever the reason, I for one am very glad that he manages to accomplish such a feat. I can't even begin to imagine the nightmare of organising such an event, especially when one is dealing with the most hopeless, unorganised individuals on earth - musicians - so I'll give Oren huge credit for simply keeping his sanity whilst putting it together. And just how on earth the Arts Council snobs managed to pull themselves away from their usual full-time occupation of...well, whatever the hell it is those people actually *do* for a living (your guess is as good as mine), to finance the operation, I'll never know. So, what is the What Is Music? festival?



SOLMANIA

What Is Music? (WIM) is essentially an annual music festival dedicated to exposing and celebrating local and international "experimental" artists, who, I guess, hope to, by their very performances, pose the question, What is music? Of course it all isn't as serious as that. One could also summarise it as a way of getting some of your favourite bands to play here - at the expense of the taxpayer - under the guise of it being part of an arts festival, but I could never be so cynical. No matter what

way you may care to describe it, I'd personally sum it up as the best week of gigging I've probably had in years. Please come in for a guided tour...

FRIDAY: Let's get to the embarrassing bit first: across the road at the Evelyn, Britain's own no-hit wonders BIS were playing. I was there. For about two songs. Here's the clincher: I had a free double pass with complimentary drinks (which I surprisingly didn't take advantage of). I won't review BIS for very obvious reasons; I simply had to state that so one could gather the irony of a band called PAEDOPHILE playing directly across the road from indie-teen wonders, BIS. That said, I missed opening band PAEDOPHILE. Don't know who they are, and I don't care, coz no matter how good or bad they were, I wouldn't be caught dead witnessing a band with a name as pathetic as that. Missed the next artist, 36, as well (Jesus, maybe someone else should be writing this article). Apparently he's some Japanese percussionist or something. Pretty good, too, apparently. There ya go. I did, however, manage to catch the abomination of PIT VIPER with PEELED HEARTS PASTE (PIT VIPER being a NZ bunch, who supposedly have an LP out on Siltbreeze; PHP is some 'Strine I don't know of), who I say pretty much summed up everything that's so incredibly awful about most "industrial" bands. You know the scene: angry white boys with heavy machinery simply making a lot of aimless noise to the delight of themselves and about three friends standing up the front. Well, to be honest, I saw a lot of people enjoying it (and friends have said that their Sydney shows were awesome), and it buggers me why, coz to me they were dull, dull, dull.

The place was starting to get quite a crowd by now; a surprisingly eclectic mix, too (even women!!), which was good to see. Genesis P-Orridge (yeah, I know, I can't believe I'm quoting him myself) once said that the reason he disowned the "industrial" music scene was because it had become a sad, boring cliché. There had become a standard fan: angry young men with either black hair or shaved heads, with army jackets and big, black boots. They like to read and write about serial killers and sex crimes and make crappy tapes of their own crappy home-made noise music. It paints such an accurate picture of so many chumps it's scary. Thank god there were few, if any, such people in attendance throughout the whole festival. Contrary to the usual cutting-edge sensibilities, it seemed like the crowd was out for a bit of fun. Now there's a new concept...

SOLMANIA is Masahiko Ohno, a one-man band consisting of merely a short Japanese computer programmer and his modified guitar. I wasn't expecting much. I mean, shit, noise is noise, how exciting can it be? Well, in this case, *rather*. SOLMANIA was good, family fun. Lots of funny screeching noise and various wailings from an extremely distorted guitar that, at roughly twenty-five minutes duration, didn't wear out its welcome. Being able to watch a guy simply play the guitar for that long and not get bored is a hell of a complement, believe it or not.

The special guest from Greece, the marvellous RIZILI, was up next. Call me a dope, but that's the impression I was under: right until after the show when I asked someone in the know who he really was (look, I hadn't seen PHLEGM in over three years, so I kinda forgot what they looked like, OK?). RIZILI is in fact Nick from PHLEGM doing, err, "performance art". Billed as some Greek nobody just off the plane, Nick jumped on stage dressed in black and proceeded to scream, cry and bang himself into the wall a lot. Oh yeah, he also wacked himself in the head quite a bit, too. For about fifteen minutes. If that sounds completely ridiculous then you'd be right, but it was also one of the funniest

things I've seen in a long time. Absurdist art, dadaism, or just some twit on stage taking the piss, take your pick, I thought it was a hoot. By the way, I had friends bringing up "that Greek guy" in conversation weeks after the event.

After way too long a wait, the headliner finally arrived, Japan's "legendary" (in kinda restricted circles) MASONNA, another one-man show delight. This is the way "noise" should be done. Not some guys with their backs to the audience twiddling on a few nobs whilst scratching their chins in a contemplative manner; rather, some fucking maniac with a microphone and a ridiculous '70's suit violently jumping around the stage like an epileptic for a good twenty minutes. Only twenty minutes isn't enough, not nearly enough. MASONNA was sheer righteousness, a riot in a basket and a hell of a fun time. When the microphone went a-swingin', I swore I thought a few front-row heads would go a-choppin', but it wasn't to be. There's safety in numbers, but geez, that guy was *scary*, having the eager audience jump back in fright on more than the odd occasion when he'd leap his way in their direction. Featuring lots of short, sharp "songs" (almost punkish in their brevity and execution) of ear-blistering white noise and screaming, distorted vocals, MASONNA gets my vote as one of the highlights of the festival, and so let it be said once again: twenty minutes was way too short for a man of such talents. A good night had by all.

SATURDAY: How's this for a review...I actually didn't attend Saturday night's performance. I had to do a goddamn stocktake (and their ain't nothing on earth as boring...) that day for work and was tired and in a shitty mood, so I passed it up. Didn't bother me as the line-up sounded a bit lame and from all reports it was exactly that. End of review.

SUNDAY: Woohoo! Two weeks off work, it's time to spend such treasured time hanging around a dingy pub with a bunch of creeps, it's time to party! First up on tonight's showcase is America's one and only HORSE-COW (not to be confused with...), the solo project of CAROLINER/FAXED HEAD's Brandon Kearney. "Background music" would sum it up nicely. Tape-looping, random noise, tape collaging, all the usual tricks. I liked it, though I'd be lying if I said I was paying much attention to it. Rather, my attention was grabbed by the DJ's for the night, ANTEDILUVIAN ROCKING HORSE, a guy/gal duo who're apparently quite the hot-shots in the local non-existent "avant-DJ" scene, and indeed have a few releases out on Ollie Olsen's Psy Harmonics label. I'll openly admit complete ignorance when it comes to "DJ culture", myself being a more hands-on rock-pig kinda guy, but my ears are always pricked and ready for something new, and the likes of ANTEDILUVIAN ROCKING HORSE might just be it. I mean, how often do I ever pay any attention to what's playing over the speakers in between bands? Pretty much never, but when someone can successfully collage a Beefheart track *backwards* with a bit of Martin Denny over the top, I'm all ears. Morricone with a bit of dub? Kraftwerk-y beats with a touch of surf? It was all there, and it looks like it might be time to make a few purchases...

Tasmania's GREG KINGSTON is another fellow I must also claim complete ignorance of, though he apparently has a few CD's out on Derek Bailey's reputable Incus label. Is this true? If so then I tip my hat in respect, and if not then I say it's time to start sending Mr. Bailey some tapes, coz Kingston is certainly in the same league and a quite the talent in his own right. GREG KINGSTON, as everyone in attendance discovered, also suffers from Tuerette Syndrome, the rare condition that compels one to senselessly yell obscenities at strangers (though this can be greatly helped through medication, which I assume he's on). This is not a joke, and in my view a highly dubious way of promoting his talents, but ethical dilemmas aside, let's discuss his music. Greg sat himself down on a solitary seat in the middle of the stage, pulled out his little bag-of-tricks suitcase set up next to him and proceeded to strum and pick away at random in a most Baileyesque fashion, intermittently picking up toys and various gimmicks from his suitcase and either playing them or bashing them against his guitar strings. I stood transfixed. It was one of the most bizarre (especially when it seemed like he was bursting into a Tuerette-induced frenzy) yet brilliant spectacles I've ever

witnessed. The next time someone gives you a spiel about how Australia ignores all its true geniuses, ask them if they attended GREG KINGSTON's performance, receive the obligatory quizzical look and prove their point.



MASONNA

I was warned about the SULTANA BRAINS: "some stupid PHLEGM offshoot" was the description I heard. Hmmm... Can't say that I thought a great deal of them, but I'm not sure if I was supposed to. The SULTANA BRAINS fall fair and square into the "good, stupid fun" category, and by that I mean that's exactly what they were. A concept band of sort, they essentially consisted of a bunch of people in masks and wacky costumes grunting out a few barely-together sludgy tunes interspersed lots of ridiculous onstage banter courtesy of the female singer. Or, to put it more accurately, it was lots of banter interspersed with a bit of music. Not sure what the point of it was, but for some reason the band had to hug each other every thirty seconds or so. Go figure. More importantly, was it enjoyable? Uhh, yeah, in a kind of non-demanding way. Naturally it's always entertaining to see a bunch of goons on stage make complete fools of themselves. Just as long as I'm not one of them.

LESTER VAT is a man I've seen around the traps many times before - as a spectator - but never as a performer. Vocalist in local "legends" VOLVOX and a self-published artist and writer of note, Lester is easily recognisable as the man with the "funny walk". Y'see, so the story goes, ten years or so ago, Lester fell through a skylight at a party and received brain and nerve damage for his troubles. Now blessed with fairly awkward bodily movements and a slight speech impediment to match, I'm reliably told that despite his tendency for rather eccentric behaviour (like his subsequent performance) Lester is sharp as a tac in all other senses. So sharp is he that the terms "genius" and "idiot savant" are often bandied about when describing him. All that aside, this was his performance: Lester, solo on stage with just a microphone for accompaniment, repeating the same one line, over and over, for 45 minutes: "Why am I a pie?". Remember that catchphrase; god knows everyone in attendance



The wacky hijinx of FAXED HEAD

that night forever will. Yes, that was the performance, almost a test of Rollins-like endurance for Lester. One simple statement: WHY AM I A PIE? After half an hour all hell broke loose; there was slamming, stagediving (certainly a first for a spoken-word gig) and lots of audience participation. Indeed, Dr. Jim, whilst presented with an actual pie on stage, presented that very question with chilling results. The conclusion: one of the strangest experiences I've ever had in a pub - one I greatly enjoyed - and one I never want to experience ever again.

A friend who plays in a band that supported FAXED HEAD on their Friday night gig at the Esplanade earlier that evening told me he thought they were a half-assed gimmick band that wore thin after about thirty seconds, were also musically lame, and plainly sucked. I kept that in mind whilst I watched them set up. Mark Harwood of Synaesthesia (there's some advertising for ya, boy!) then proceeded to inform me that a FAXED HEAD 7" I sold to him the week previous for only \$4 was just bought by some putz for \$15. I was really starting to hate them. That said, I actually thought they weren't that bad. Whilst I'm generally pretty averse to gimmicky bands, especially when there's no decent music to back up the gaggy, FAXED HEAD were both quite "funny" (in an ever-so-slight way) and musically pretty right-on. Featuring CARLINER's Brandon Kearney, MR. BUNGLER's Trey Spruance (which was what, I assume, brought the crowd in) and the awesomely tragic Gregg Turkington/Neil Hamburger on vocals, FAXED HEAD's "concept" (certainly a night for them) was that of a collection of heavy-metal fan/suicide-attempt survivors playing death metal. Yep, that's it. With the usual face masks and costumes and Mr. Hamburger in a wheelchair and adorning head gear, they kept my attention all the way through with their ludicrous Bathory/Venom riffs and accompanying grunting pretty fine indeed. I guess I'm just an undemanding kinda guy.

A night of gimmickry and stupidity that I thoroughly enjoyed. Christ, Freud would have a field day...

MONDAY: This is starting to get a bit weird. I'm coming to a pub every night and seeing exactly the same people every time. What is it with these people? Don't they have homes to go home to, lives to live? Obviously not, and you'd probably better put me in the same basket, thank you very much. Still, I can't seem to get past the rather bizarre spectacle of coming to the same pub, night after night; something, you may find difficult to swallow, I've never cared to indulge in before.

Tonight was the night I was really looking forward to, the night of the great Kiwi invasion, those people from across the ocean with the funny accents. I have various friends who seem to have a bit of a love affair with that sweet land; some even possessing a near fanatical obsession with its music. Myself, I'm a fan of a few of its finer artists, mainly the Dead C. and Alastair Galbraith, but that's generally as far as my enthusiasm goes. Yes, I've read *Opprobrium* and heard all about Corpus Hermeticum and all those "free/improv" bands currently breeding like flies on its mainland, but I just simply ain't got the time or finances to be investigating everything currently coming out of that damn country, especially when it seems like every shuckster with an old keyboard or guitar can instantly press up 25 copies of a 7" and be guaranteed a good review in *Forced Exposure*. It's just *too easy* these days. Then again, the thought of witnessing two of its finer exports, THELA and GARBAGE AND THE FLOWERS, excited me to no end.

Got there late once again (so many family gatherings, so little time), so I missed opening acts A/B/F/T and THAT, but from all reports they were "kinda cool". Stick that one in yer bio! I did, nevertheless, manage to witness the full glory of GARBAGE AND THE FLOWERS, the NZ ensemble specialising in awesomely expansive Velvets-damaged "folk/noise rock", for the lack of a



Comedy-duo extravaganza: PIRATES OF SATURN

better term. Needless to say, there are many bands who hail the Velvet Underground as a pivotal influence in their music; most are flat-out pansies. This was not the case here. GATF were easily the standout of the festival, and quite simply one of the best rock bands I've seen in years. Taking their cues mainly from the Velvets' third, mostly acoustic LP, GATF managed to create a completely brain-expanding blend of sweet, folky melodies and hair-splitting segments of white noise. It's hard to do them justice with the written word, especially since the phrase "noise-pop" has become a near insult in this man's world, but GATF indeed perfected that very combination of strumming, melodic folk-rock and pulsating screeches with brilliant ease, and if they're ever in town again, or if you manage to stumble across any of their rather elusive records, well, you've at least got my recommendation to check 'em out.

Time to grab a front-row seat, the GREG KINGSTON BIG BAND is up next. This time Greg was joined by various alumni from the experimental music scene, mainly people from PHLEGM, LAZY, MACHINE FOR MAKING SENSE, etc., for a shot of John Zorn's Cobra shenanigans, and the easiest way to explain that is to call it a game of musical chairs for musicians. A "conductor" of sorts stands up the front (this time it was Oren from PHLEGM) with a collection of instruction cards indicating who should solo, duo, improvise, etc., and proceeds to flash said cards to the musicians in the hope of it eventuating into a cohesive, yet improvised, effort. This time it worked. I'd seen it done once before with Mr. Bungle at the Continental and thought it was a bit patchy, though with all the right musicians, and especially the charismatic GREG KINGSTON in the spotlight, the right elements were all in their place. As per usual, it started off with everyone contributing their own bits in turn, and then developed into a free-for-all before gradually evolving into a group effort where a honky-tonk riff was played with and generally mauled and destroyed by all present. Improvisation can often be a boring mess, and I'm glad to say that wasn't the case tonight.

THELA are a band you may've heard of. I'd sure heard of them before - the Ecstatic Peace record deal, the critical praisings, the interviews and articles, the solo records by the main guitarist - yet I'd never actually heard anything they'd done. Having no real expectations, positive or negative, I simply decided to observe, absorb, and wait for the end result to sink in. Verdict: 7.5/10, which means I thought they were rather good, with points taken off for the sheer brevity of the performance (the soundman must be the walking definition of anal retention). Not exactly being the stageshow spectacular of the year, THELA consisted of a small group of individuals, mainly with their backs to the audience, hitting on their guitar strings with drumsticks, the result being a rather lovely Eastern-sounding concoction of chiming twangs and abstract, ambient hums. I'm even tempted to throw in a Harry Partch comparison, but I get a feeling such a reference might just throw a few people off the rails a bit. Things got a little rock'n'roll when the drummer jumped into action about fifteen minutes into the set, but unfortunately the set was approximately 15 minutes and 30 seconds long - obscenely short for a headline band - so my excitement was kind of short lived. Despite that shortcoming, for the brief moment that THELA were on the stage, I was mesmerised, enthralled and in a world of sound I didn't want to escape from, and if that isn't a sign of a successful show then nothing is. Drove home with a big smile of satisfaction...

TUESDAY: Here I am again, people, the same old familiar face... what the hell are you staring at? Yeah, it's me again, at the Punters Club for the fourth time in five days. Are you insinuating I have no life? Am I getting a little paranoid here? I feel like a man about to be granted parole. After this night, that's it. No more of ear-battering, pub-dwelling, why-the-hell-am-I-here-yet-again life to be lived. Freedom awaits me, but until then I'll take the plunge and punish myself one more time. Why it is that I feel compelled to come back night after night must simply result from

er fun I've had over the last few evenings. Look, I'm not a suitable guy when it comes to music: a spade is a spade, and a lame, worthless band is exactly what I just said it was, but blow me down if the standard of "talent" throughout the festival hasn't been quite outstanding. Hey, I'm still here. Tattoo it on my forehead: I'M IMPRESSED.

First up on tonight's dazzling smorgasbord of the stars was PIRATES OF SATURN from the US of A. I didn't know anything about them, except that they were yet another FAXED HEAD offshoot. My expectations weren't high...not that I've got anything against such people, but Jesus M. Christ-on-a-popsicle-stick, how many offshoots is enough?! Three per band member? Roughly that, so I'll cut POS some slack, mainly for the fact that they were very entertaining, and yes, even funny. A comedy duo of sorts, POS are a drummer, a "keyboardist/noisemaker", and two smart asses telling ridiculous, convoluted, barely comprehensible stories concerning pirates and the like. Dumb but witty, I'll give them credit for the abundance of wisecracks and smart-alecery that even had me bursting into laughter on occasion. However, on another note, let me risk embarrassment and ponder a question here: are these the same guys that put out that Raymond & Peter CD, *Shut Up Little Man*, a few years ago? I've always been under the impression that Raymond and Peter were actually "real" people, but these guys sounded remarkably similar in their voices and mannerisms, and their Tedium House (the label that released *Shut Up Little Man*) connections gets me suspicious, especially with their given reputations for prankery. Has my paranoia finally beaten me to the punch? Maybe I need a vacation from this pub...

The almighty BOVRIL OF ELECTROCUTION were to hit the stage next, so mighty were they that I've completely forgotten who they were. Strike it down to them being boring or me having a bad memory. Next!

NODDING TURD FAN were next. I'm a member, but didn't really feel like performing on the night, so I decided not to join in. No, I'm not currently under the effects of some heavy mind-altering drugs, that was the scenario. Nodding Turd Fan is supposedly the pet project of Trey Spruance, in which he coaxes the audience into some sort of participatorial role in the performance. Tonight it was the entire audience scraping pieces of broken styrofoam together (handed out to everyone at the start) in unison until one was bombarded with the ear-piercing sounds of a pub gone mad. It may sound like frat-boy hijinx to you, but I thought it was quite the party (even though I didn't actually get a-scrapin'...call me Mr. Stick In The Mud). Things were brought to a whole new level of excitement when the breakdancers were brought out of the fold: a drunken Dr. Jim impressing no one with his breakin' and poppin' on the dance floor; Lester Vat being Lester Vat with an attempt at boogie that can only be described as "unique"; and lastly, but most certainly not least: Nick from Phlegm dazzling everyone present with a breakin' performance that shook the walls. I'll say it once: this guy is a professional, and I'd be willing to bet large sums of money that he took the odd lesson or dozen back in the '80's. Naturally I kept a very low profile during the performance in fear of being dragged on stage by some idiot friend looking to embarrass the hell out of me. Seriously, one of the festival's highlights.

The grand finale is here, the last band on the bill: PHLEGM. I saw Phlegm back in '94 once and thought they were awful. Self-indulgent tedium without regard for anyone else present. I wrote a suitably negative review in a fanzine and have since been held in contempt by the band in question ever since. That's not so now. We kissed and made up earlier on (I mean, Jesus, I always loved the CD, but face it guys, that gig stunk...) and agreed to let bygones be bygones. Nice chaps, if the truth be known. Enough of the choking sentimentalities, let's discuss the alleged talents of Phlegm... tonight, aided and abetted by Lester Vat on vocals (what a performer), they were hot. Things were slow in getting started - again, too much of that mucking around that can bore a man to early retirement - but finally things *clicked* and things *rocked*. Phlegm make a better rock'n'roll band than they ever will as a "noise ensemble" (or whatever) and should stick to what they do best: kick-ass Melvins/Boredoms-damaged thunder-rock. Still, when they weren't kickin' butt, there was enough happening on stage to keep one informed and excited: Phlegm's

"wacky" costumes and Lester Vat's antics and attempts to "lead" the group. Yeah, they were good, and a fitting ending to a festival well done.

In hindsight I can honestly say that the WIM festival is the best, most interesting music festival or event I've attended since that other thing years ago. Yeah, *that* one. There was a wider array of "talent" (now there's a subjective term) and genres than you'd see just about anywhere in the world, and most of all, there was a good atmosphere to accompany the proceedings. Certain acquaintances were quite shocked to hear that I *never* listen to "noise" (as in the earblasting variety, "power electronics", if you will) these days - and haven't done so for a good three years - even selling just about all my noise records off to a certain Mr. Harwood. I simply gave up on noise because I became bored with it. To me it was a "musical" dead end, something one can pursue for a while - some, it seems, *forever* - but ultimately it becomes a form of musical wallpaper, something one can't really pay any attention to. To me it's old hat - Stockhausen and Cage did it better back in the '50's and '60's - and the "culture" of noise is something I find very tiring. Too many angry men flirting with Nazism and bondage, too many wankers thinking extremity for its own sake actually possesses any aesthetic worth anymore. I'll always enjoy dissonance in my music (as well as a distinct lack thereof, in cases), but to me one single Cecil Taylor, Derek Bailey or electric Miles record embodies more genuine chaos and *will to experiment* than a thousand Whitehouse copycats will ever achieve. And I'd rather read *Mad* than *Answer Me!*. I'm not putting down anyone into the "noise scene"; it still has its moments of great worth (Merzbow, Nurse With Wound), and people can like what they want, but for myself it remains something I just can't connect with.

That most upsetting piece of news said, the aspects of "noise" I find unpleasant were not in evidence at the WIM festival: it was not, for all intents and purposes, a "noise" event. It was about making a racket, having a laugh and enjoying yourself. Let's make it a date for next year, baby!

SYNAESTHESIA

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