



Mud, Music and Magic: Dancing, hugs, a couple of duds, rain and other impressions from 4 days of Wakarusa

By Cheree Franco /Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

OZARK - Wakarusa has a reputation as a longtime jam-band festival that increasingly caters to the blissed-out, hula-hooping hippie's alter ego, the electronically fueled, dance-all-night party kid. And certainly these "types" (and their drugs) are present—barefooted, nappy-headed, decked in glow jewelry and body paint. But the biggest camping and music festival in the state is more nuanced than this, and some of the best sets offer no trace of that progressive rock/jazz fusion that typically constitutes "jam." And regardless, there's something about the mist, the mud, the c'est la vie attitude, the booths lining the midway, the fire dancers, the swarming people and the twinkly-lighted path to the forested Backwoods stage that is comfortingly surreal. It's a

mesh of half-suggested archetypes - part Wild West, part Woodstock, part old-time carnival.

This is especially true at night, wandering to the Mideast-meets-Celtic soundtrack of "BollyMunster," which comes halfway through a nearly four-hour String Cheese Incident set that also included, unexpectedly, an Eminem cover.

"I don't think we'd ever been to another festival when it started, so it kind of has its own identity and vibe," said co-founder Brett Mosiman, 53. His company, Pipeline Productions, books shows year-round and puts on the smaller Harvest Music Festival at this same location each fall.

SELLING BOOTS AND FILLING JAILS

Eleven years ago, Wakarusa began in a state park in Kansas. In 2009, it moved to its current 650-acre Mulberry Mountain site, a rustic resort ringed by verdant hills that open to a wide, textured sky. Mulberry Mountain is 20 miles north of Ozark, population 3,600. The festival draws about 23,000 people a day for five days, pulling attendees from all 50 states and several countries. According to Linda Millsap, with the Ozark Chamber of Commerce, locals are grateful for the influx.

Last year, the chamber polled 20 businesses. Restaurants and retail stores, particularly thrift stores, reported significant revenue spikes during Waka, and the town sold out of galoshes. (Wakarusa 2013 is oft referred to as "Swamparusa.")

Ron Oats at Oxford Inn said that each year his 32 rooms are booked a month in advance by bands and festival crew, and he's able to charge holiday rates. Wakarusa officially runs Thursday at noon till Monday at 2 a.m., although people who register for early arrival can catch a few sets on Wednesday. (Those who don't register are likely to wait 12 hours in a stationary line of cars, says Chad Claborn, 22, a musician and cable installer from Austin, Texas.)

Thursday afternoon, the truck stop at I-40's exit 23, 16 miles from Waka headquarters, was already a hub. Lines for gas were rivaled only by those for the restroom, likely the last flush toilets for days. By the store's door, vendors sold scarves, flowing dresses and woven bags. Twentysomethings danced in the parking lot, near a van stuffed with camping equipment and a sign that read, "We need tickets."

Franklin County Sheriff Anthony Bowen worried about housing fresh arrests, since his 26-bed jail was already full of locals. (Turns out, Franklin County would have 47 festival-related arrests this year, down from 60 last year. There were also about a dozen arrests in Benton and Washington counties, of people on the way to and from the fest.) "It's a lot of drug offenses and some disorderly conduct. The State Police, they set up sobriety checkpoints, and they get a few driving under the influence," Bowen said.

Keeping attendees safe is a joint effort between a handful of law enforcement agencies, as well as Pipeline's own security and medics. But in the week following Waka, posts appeared on social media describing missing friends. One man turned up in West Virginia, after leaving the festival and hitching home. A 21-year-old from Pennsylvania, whose picture circulated on Little Rock Facebook feeds, joined another group of campers and was located two days after losing her group. According to the Franklin County sheriff's office, Corey Richardson, a 23-year-old man from Atlanta, is still missing.

MARRYING MUD AND MUSIC

Defining moments of Waka 2014: Wayne Coyne, Flaming Lips frontman, married an Oklahoma couple onstage (groom Chris Ludwig says they made it official at the courthouse in Ozark); bears pummeled tents in the volunteer campground (no campers were harmed); tow trucks hauled cars out of the muck (this was no Swamparusa, but there was plenty of muck); a naked toddler danced to Paul Simon's Graceland on Friday morning near the deserted Main Stage, while most people slept off Thursday night's electronic music glut; and the mud-splattered dance-off formerly known as Keys N Krates.

Favorite sets: Reignwolf, Walk Off the Earth, Coyote Union, Dirtfoot (at Chompdown), Air Dubai and Moon Taxi. Most popular sets (per an unofficial survey): String Cheese Incident, STS9 (mixed reviews on new bass player Alana Rocklin), Bassnectar, Umphrey's McGee and The Floozies. (For the uninitiated: funky jam-bands and groovy space music, heavily dosed with electronica and, likely, ingested chemicals.) Most unfortunate miss: Bawdy, bro-humored Andy Frasco's secret, self-dubbed "party-blues" show at some unofficial tent, whilst boring people (gulp, guilty) were distracted by a lackluster Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros performance.

NONOBJECTIVE OBSERVATIONS

I'm a decade past the age where frolicking in mud in close proximity to (estimating here) 1,000 port-o-potties, and/or gazing into strangers' eyes while poignantly stroking their faces and offering them candy, and/or stripping in public because "clothing is slave rags!" (yeah, that happened) is considered cute. That's my disclaimer, Waka-heads, if I ignore your favorite moments.

I arrived Thursday night and stage-hopped, until finally settling down at Dr. Dog on Friday evening. The band's soulful pop, melodic grooves, Dylan-esque phrasing (at least when guitarist Scott McMicken sings) and tempered stage presence are better suited to an intimate venue. But bassist Toby Leaman did storm the crowd and plop down atop some guy in a camper chair. Then a girl plopped atop Leaman and kissed his cheek - all of which infused the set with a needed energy boost.

The Flaming Lips were an even bigger letdown, though not for lack of spectacle. Maybe my expectations were too high, after catching them a year ago at a tiny Austin venue, where they played straight through the album *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* and sounded fantastic. That time, there was no larger-than-life puff-characters, no audience doused with confetti, no oversized Mylar balloons spelling out "Fuck yeah, Wakarusa," no spaceship drones (still trying to figure out if this was part of the set or festival surveillance!), no Coyne in a skintight muscle suit. This set had all of that and more, but it was awkward.

Coyne seemed greedy for affection, demanding more than a drug-addled, storm-weary audience could offer. He tried to coerce people into singing along to songs they didn't know. Toward the end of the two-hour set, he was vocally straining. (Kudos, though, on the David Bowie "Heroes" cover.)

Saturday afternoon, I saw my two favorite sets of Waka, both on the main stage. Walk Off the Earth (WOTE) is a Canadian pop band with a "world music" flavor and a fun approach to percussion. They first attracted attention with lo-fi pop covers on YouTube, rehashing the likes of Lorde, Taylor Swift and Rihanna. Often these covers are gimmicky (their version of Gotye's "Somebody That I Used to Know," with all five members playing a single guitar, went viral), but their originals are so innocuous, on YouTube it's hard to know when the commercial has ended and the song has begun.

But WOTE was perfect at Waka. They were in constant motion, tossing and catching (all but once) their instruments, bringing roadies onstage, their sole female member, Sarah Blackwood, bounding around like a backpacking cheerleader. (The band seems the type to haunt European hostels, giving off this wholesome but seasoned "Lonely Planet" air.)

As the group played two of their most noted originals, "Summer Vibe" and "Red Hands," the breeze picked up, the trees behind the stage swayed and the (modest) crowd danced. The sounds were clean, the harmonies pretty. The entire WOTE package melded well with Waka's mellow, 1 p.m. just-woke-up vibe.

Then the clouds broke, the sky poured, the band kept playing. So the crowd danced harder, cementing that whole jaunty freedom thing. It was the kind of show that left the audience feeling buzzy, but in a healthy way.

Then there was Reignwolf, which I happily stumbled upon. What was this phenomenon, this unblinking virtuoso with feral hair, swathed in layers of black (ripped jeans, leather jacket, flannel and T-shirt)? Who was this guy, who convulsed his body, pulverized his guitar, crouched atop the kick-drum, rode the security rail and, at the end of his set, yanked out strings with his teeth? What was this warped sound, this Mississippi howl

meets Jimi Hendrix whine, this easy rhythm buried under gravelly vocals, reverb and rudimentary drums? It veered from cluttered to stripped, but it was always gritty and snarling. Sometimes Jordan "Reignwolf" Cook played with a drummer and bassist. Other times he played alone, banging the drum with one hand, picking the guitar with the other. There were only a few dozen people in the crowd, but Reignwolf slayed us, and we welcomed the assault.

Freshly converted, I hung out for Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros, who are Reignwolf's polar opposite - sunshine and love, alt-folk euphoria. Except that it wasn't euphoric. Frontman Alex Ebert gallivanted among the crowd as usual and even sat on the ground and staged a sing-along with fans kneeling around him. But Ebert seemed tired and sullen, lost without co-vocalist Jade Castrinos, who was recently booted from the band. The Zeros played crowd favorites, "Man on Fire" and "Home" (Ebert relied on fans to carry the latter), but overall, the set fell short.

There was rain every day of Waka, but Sunday the downpour was relentless. I caught a midafternoon set at the Backwoods stage by a young, rootsy quartet from Mountain Home. Thanks to the weather, there were only about 30 people in the audience, most of whom seemed to be personal friends of the band. But Coyote Union delivered a boot-stomping, mandolin-smacking, guitar-wrenching performance that their recorded tracks will, unfortunately, never emulate.

As Northwest Arkansas kids dispersed down the puddled path, I knew I was done. My dry car waited and in about two hours, there was the promise of my first shower in four days. Thanks, Coyote Union, for a quintessentially "Arkansas" ending to a wet, whirlwind experience. Thanks, Pipeline, for a smooth festival and well-stocked port-a-potties. And finally, thanks, Wakaheads, for the plethora of unsolicited hugs.