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SUPERLATIVES: THE NINES FESTIVAL, DEVENS, MA

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On August 10, I had the pleasure of attending a fantastic day-long music and arts festival in beautiful central Massachusetts. 2013 was The Nines' first year in existence, but the festival didn't suffer from rookie mistakes (apart, possibly, from the fact that there were only two food carts to cater for the entire audience): the music was seriously excellent, the art displays were vibrant and engaging, and everything about the festival screamed "done right." To give you faithful readers a recap of the festival, we'll give you "superlatives" to describe some of the most memorable moments of the day (and night).

Best Art Display: Everything

I tried to choose just one exhibit for this, but there was so much excellent art at the festival that it's impossible to just mention a single piece. From the world's longest xylophone to the giant metallic fish to the illuminated PVC pipe which lit up the last few hours of the festival, there was no shortage of amazing work here.

Most Family-Friendly: Air Traffic Controller

Especially after an expletive-laden set from Walter Sickert and his Army of Broken Toys, hometown heroes Air Traffic Controller delivered an excellent alternative-rock set for all ages, as evidenced by the five- and six-year-olds running around near lead singer and guitarist Dave Munro. The set itself was pretty harmless, fun, chilled-out singer-songwriter-styled material, and given how popular the group has been with local independent Boston radio stations the reception was warm, if not overly enthusiastic (most of the audience was sitting down in lawn chairs and on towels for the entire set).

Most Technical Skill: Tie, Shuggie Otis & Kid Koala

These two acts shined on opposite sides of the instrumental spectrum. On one, Shuggie Otis and his band ("rite," as he called it) played funk, jazz, blues, and rock like they'd been doing it for 40 years (which, indeed, they have). Shuggie's supreme skill up and

down the fretboard wowed many a festival-goer, and the band, especially the brass section, chipped in with some absolutely killer solos. On the other, Kid Koala played unquestionably the best DJ set I've ever seen. As some of you may remember, superstar producer and Swedish House Mafia member Steve Angello came under fire recently for **some remarks about the possibility of DJing with no headphones**. Kid Koala proved this statement in a totally different way than people might have expected for Angello: his equipment consisted solely of three turntables, all vinyl, and a bunch of records to play. And what a performance it was. The DJ played everything from classic movie music to Ray Charles to modern trap, scratching and fading like a madman over the entirety of his hour-long set. The way he recreates his music live is nothing short of incredible, and he moved with such a fury and attention to detail that it was impossible not to be impressed, as evidenced by the attendees' shocked expressions throughout most of his set.

Biggest Surprise: Walter Sickert and the Army of Broken Toys

It's a known fact of the live music world that opening acts tend to be hit-or-miss, but Walter Sickert and the Army of Broken Toys were one of the biggest opening act hits I've yet to witness. Their show was eccentric, enigmatic, and charismatic, and the few people who were there early enough for their set were wowed by the band's raw energy and instrumental prowess. Lead singer Walter, a white guy with super-long dreads and a faux-tribal headdress, strummed on an acoustic guitar while the rest of his band jammed on mandolin, guitar, violin, some sort of mouth-keyboard, flute and ukelele. The show was spectacular and a fantastic way to kick off the festival, and set the standard for the rest of the day.

Most Disappointing: Walk Off The Earth

Ontario-based pop-rock quintet Walk Off The Earth unexpectedly proved to be a major bummer. I was expecting generic, white-bread male-female pop rock, sure, but I was at least expecting some *life* in their set. Pop rock can be done in a very fluid, natural way — just ask previous act Matt Pond. However, WOTE's set was choreographed to the point where it felt as though all life and energy within had been sucked out months ago. The identically-printed "REVO" (the title of their debut album) sweatshirts at the beginning of the show, their tossing instruments before and after every song to the

countless hands-on-deck they had helping out, even their little hops from left to right which happened at exactly the same time all led to a set totally devoid of the intensity that usually makes live music so much more exciting than the recording. Aside from their recreation of their viral cover of Gotye's "Somebody That I Used To Know" and the energetic reggae-rock-influenced "Sometimes," the set was unfortunately not quite what I was expecting.

Biggest "What the Hell Were You Expecting?" Moment: Explosions In The Sky

There's honestly not all that much to say about Explosions In The Sky's set, other than the fact that it was incredible as expected. Anyone unfamiliar with EITS's legendary live performances was in for a treat (as was everyone else packed into the main-stage area), and the Texas quartet delivered with a seven-song setlist that was one of the best sets of the day. The ebb and flow of their music which makes them such a wonderful band to listen to was on full display over the course of the hour-plus set, and the group faded brilliantly in and out of songs, building up for minutes upon minutes before finally unleashing the built-up tension in a surreal fortissimo. In particular, the ending of closer "The Only Moment We Were Alone" was probably the best single moment of the entire ten hours of music at The Nines, and the crowd's cheers afterwards completely drowned out whatever spokesman-of-sorts Munaf Rayani had to say at the end of the show.

Best Set: K.Flay

However, even Explosions In The Sky's incredible live set couldn't top Illinois-based rapper/producer K.Flay (née Kristine Flaherty). It's entirely possible her set was so good just because it was at the crossroads of quite a few fortunate circumstances: right after the disappointing Walk Off The Earth set, in the much smaller side tent for a far more intimate show, with the first side-tent crowd that was actually standing instead of sitting. However, even with all of this, K.Flay earned her title of "best set." For starters, I don't think I've ever seen quite so much vibrancy from any live performer — though I hate to use clichés, the best way I think her performance could be described was that she was absolutely spitting fire. The 45-minute set was a roller-coaster ride of adrenaline and raw energy — she hopped around on the stage like a madwoman, headbanged like the party girl she sometimes professes herself to be, and even took some drumsticks and

banged on a drum for a bit. Also, her music is really quite good - her style of hyper-intelligent social-commentary rap went over well, and the gritty, minimalist industrial beats complemented her breathy voice and occasional squeaks perfectly. Finally, her live drummer was one of the best performers at the festival - he went hard for the whole set, absolutely destroying the well-EQ'd drum set. Overall, K.Flay found a convert in me, and I'm glad I had the privilege of witnessing her set.