

tastemakers

THE NINES FESTIVAL @ WILLARD FIELD 8.10.13

by Joseph Dussault (Journalism), published October 7th 2013

<http://tastemakersmag.com/features/2013/the-nines-festival-willard-field-8-10-13/>

When I strolled into the Nines Festival in Devens, MA, I expected the “9 o’Diamonds Stage” to host a light opener. Someone to create a gentle atmosphere while concert-goers orient themselves amongst stages and vendors and tents. Instead, I was greeted with bible-tearing, ass-baring vulgarities. And it was fantastic.

Walter Sickert & the Army of Broken Toys couldn’t exist further left of the mainstream, so I will elaborate. The Army of Broken Toys are a collective of musicians and burlesque dancers – equal parts poetry and performance art – fronted by the bearish steampunk genius, Walter Sickert. Their carnival-inspired juxtaposition of folk and punk was both profane and exciting. Each original song they played seemed to be better (and racier) than the last. Their take on the Stones’ “Paint it Black” was lackluster, but their cover of “I Put a Spell on You” was better suited to their style and would likely have made one Screamin’ Jay Hawkins quite proud. Sickert donned an ornate headdress during part of the set, and paraded around the grounds in gaudy brilliance when the band was through playing. Given their relative obscurity, it’s unsurprising that the Army of Broken Toys were delegated to open the show. Still, a mad spectacle such as this would have done better in lower light.

Next, my photographer and I shuffled to the “Lucky Cat Stage” to catch **Air Traffic Controller**. These Boston locals earned their spot on the fest with a winning campaign on Sonicbids, and it’s easy to understand why. Air Traffic Controller is an exemplary Boston band, playing earthy indie-pop that makes for good drinking music. They even have a song completely dedicated to baseball flicks like *The Sandlot* and *Field of Dreams* in “If You Build It.” The multi-instrumental talents of Steve Scott and Casey Sullivan complemented the sharp songwriting of Dave Munro (who, I should specify, was an actual air traffic controller for the U.S Navy). The lead single on their most recent album *NORDO*, “Hurry Hurry,” was impossibly catchy, and its crunchy synths made this track stand out among otherwise organic pieces. “Thinking of You,” the last track on *NORDO*, was recorded with the Boston University Orchestra. Air Traffic Controller performed a stripped-down version of the track for the Nines, but the song didn’t suffer for lack of an orchestra. Perhaps most notably, the band had a doe-

eyed enthusiasm that blocked any and all of my attempts at cynicism. Considering how many of Air Traffic Controller's contemporaries are jaded hipsters, that's truly a feat.

Mainstage artist **Shuggie Otis** taught a rare lesson in soul to an audience that probably wasn't aware how familiar they were with his music – his "Strawberry Letter 23" was sampled in Outkast's "Ms. Jackson" and Beyonce's "Be With You," among others. Otis' contribution to R&B and pop music is largely underappreciated, but his performance was one of the most memorable of the festival. Shuggie's band, dubbed the Shuggie Otis Rite, brought incredible energy and meticulous musicianship from the first note to the last. Bassist James Manning was all smiles while providing a quintessentially funky low-end. Albert Wing, who looked decidedly like my own grandfather, played the bari sax with tone and feeling superior to many of his younger peers. Then there was Michael Turre. While the rest of the band grooved with the music, a noticeably stiff Turre barely shuffled. He sported a floppy fishing hat complete with a string tie, as if he were concerned that it might otherwise fall off due to the severity of his motions. He was the perfect picture of silliness. And then he played, instantly shutting up my inner monologue. Turre's playing offered up whatever baddassery his outward appearance lacked.

Shuggie himself seemed tired at first, but it became increasingly clear that humility is just a part of his character. Otis revealed his subtle humor as the set progressed, but he was truly on-point when performing "Wings of Love," a song he has been trying to release for nearly 40 years. The mammoth, 11-minute fusion of classic soul and funk with 80s synth cheese has been turned down by nearly every major record label. But he never gave up on it, and to hear him play it live after decades of silence was inspiring. Tracks like "Sweet Thang" sounded better live than on the record, which is impressive when you realize that Otis hasn't been on tour in four decades. And while it's hard to believe a man of 59 could be considered sexy, I don't think anybody at the Nines would deny that Shuggie oozed some serious sex appeal.

Back at the Lucky Cat Stage, **Matt Pond** and his band offered up stompy indie rock a la Frank Turner. The guys in this band are remarkable to watch. Hundreds of bands, and I have never seen one as tight and purposeful as Matt Pond. They managed to emote while keeping it tasteful, never indulging in a song too loud or a solo too lengthy. Their seemingly methodic reservation did eventually

wear, but they had already upped their sense of urgency by the time I noticed, finishing on a strong point with “Giving It All Away” and “Love to Get Used.”

It’s one thing to get a crowd going, but Matt Pond and his band are seasoned pros when it comes to keeping that crowd. A little bit of risk-taking would go a long way for this band, but until then earnest songwriting and expert performances will keep them going strong for the foreseeable future.

Walk Off the Earth started their set facing away from audience in matching “R.E.V.O.” hoodies, referencing the title of their latest LP, as well as their motto: “Realize Every Victory Outright.” This would-be exciting stage antic was diminished under the feebleness of this mantra, which sounds more like a mistranslation than bona-fide wisdom, and was further marred by a temporarily bad mix. However, as soon as the sound guys caught up, Walk Off the Earth demonstrated some serious crowd-working. Their highly choreographed performance was gimmicky but undeniably entertaining. The audience delighted in this spectacle, as the band *threw* their instruments back and forth and banged on guitar strings with drumsticks. Yet, the loudest cheers were in response to Mike “Beard Guy” Taylor’s simple “plink” from their cover of Gotye’s “Somebody That I Used to Know,” which went viral last year. If that’s not telling of the prevailing internet-culture, I don’t know what is.

The set was cover-heavy, presumably due to the weakness of their original material. Walk Off the Earth evoked the same kind of excitement as projects like Girl Talk, in that I felt like I was watching the best cover band I had ever seen. My only major complaint here was that the latter part of their set contained some “vocal enhancement.” There was no lip-synching involved, but there were fairly conspicuous vocal backing tracks in a few numbers. This might be understandable for a band with one singer, but each of Walk off the Earth’s five members are all (seemingly) capable vocalists. No excuses, guys.

You may have heard her song “Easy Fix” on the soundtrack of the 2013 apocalyptic comedy film *This is the End*. Or perhaps “So Fast, So Maybe,” on *Girls*, Lena Dunhams HBO comedy-drama series. Still, the likelihood is that you haven’t heard of **K. Flay** unless suburban indie rap a la MC Lars is your thing. Stanford University graduate Kristine Flaherty got her start as a “suburban rap queen” parodying the misogynistic lyrics she felt were ever-present in mainstream hip-hop. Flaherty’s lyrics

deal heavily in triviality—comically serious verses about Vanilla Coke act as scathing and hilarious digs at the excesses of her contemporaries. At the Nines, the great irony of K. Flay was apparent—she has surpassed many of the rappers she started her career satirizing in terms of flow and lyrical content.

That being said, the moments where Flaherty sheds parody are encouraging, if not a bit disingenuous. On songs like “The Cops,” she flirts so heavily with sad indie pop that one begins to forget that she is first and foremost an emcee. That’s not to say that the songs don’t work – truly, many are a huge step up for her. However, it often feels like K. Flay isn’t committing fully to her own ideas. And if she needs to drop the hip-hop persona to do that, all the better.

While Walk Off the Earth represented showmanship and K. Flay served up self-parody, **Delta Spirit** oozed authenticity. Frontman Matthew Vasquez exuded the same type of madman stage presence as Anthony Green did in his drugged-out years, making sly remarks and goading the crowd. He fed from audience reactions almost lustfully. Delta Spirit refused to cater to fair-weather fans, radiating gritty, rock n’ roll vibes to a festival that had been enjoyable but otherwise fairly tame (with the exception of Walter Sickert’s band). Closing with “California” may not have been the best call – it’s easily their most recognizable single, but it was a huge drop in energy at the end of a blistering set.

Perhaps the greatest musical outlier of the evening was Eric San, also known as **Kid Koala**, turntablist mastermind behind Deltron 3030. I was skeptical that a lone DJ could captivate the same way a live band could, but Kid Koala is a performer by all standards. All of his transitions were seamless and *improvised*. His set contained enough “oh, snap!” moments to put a seasoned freestyle rapper to shame. He spun with three turntables at once, which means that any mistake would be three-fold. However, the danger of this act only added thrill to his set. Anyone who doubts Kid Koala’s artistry should refer to his homage to Louis Armstrong, “Drunk Trumpet.” San used samples of Louis’ own trumpet playing and gave it a completely unique voice, and in the spirit of jazz, improvised that re-purposed instrument live. He even made Armstrong’s characteristic scrunched faces, showcasing his sense of humor which rendered the nearby comedy tent temporarily unnecessary.

San took ownership of the cutest moment of the festival when he was joined by his daughter Maple, age 4, for a song. His contribution to the oddly impressive musical catalogue of the children’s show *Yo Gabba Gabba* included simple dance instructions (see: “Reach for the sky! Now touch your toes!”)

that were followed as enthusiastically by the crowd as they were by San's daughter. As if that weren't enough, San was compelled to wear an actual koala suit during the song as per the terms of a lost bet. Maple, in typical childish fashion, was disinterested in the remainder of her father's set, but he certainly had the rest of the crowd won over.

At the 9 o'Diamonds stage, Pennsylvania natives **Dr. Dog** impressed with their brand of 60s-infused indie pop. When singing "The Beach," Bassist Toby "Tables" Leaman was simultaneously seductive and terrifying. Scott "Taxi" McMicken seemed aloof, but charmingly so (see: Rivers Cuomo, circa 1996). At the Nines, we were graced with their second-ever performance of "Distant Light." If this song is any indication, Dr. Dog's upcoming LP *B-Room* will be an essential listen.

Dr. Dog played with a natural cohesion that made every fill, riff and run look easy. The chemistry between members of Dr. Dog extended to us, too. The sense of community felt between heads in the audience was palpable, and that in itself made their set worth seeing.

When Texas post-rock outfit **Explosions in the Sky** took the stage, they commanded silence. They were at once instrumentally sound and physically emotive. In "Catastrophe and the Cure," Michael James played on his knees, apparently bending to the incomprehensible weight of the song. Explosions in the Sky were the antithesis of Walk Off the Earth. There were no stage antics, matching outfits, witty banter, or choreography. Just music. Fortunately, EITS play music that speaks for itself. EITS is a band that is known for crafting incredible mini-symphonies, but their music sounded even better that night in Devens, where it could wash over open air rather than be stifled by the walls of a club. During the set, the off-stage tent reserved for bands to watch from was *packed* with members of nearly every other band on the bill. I can only hope they were all taking notes.

My experience at the Nines was overwhelmingly positive. For a first-time fest, it was remarkably well organized and executed. The art was immersive – if you weren't crowded around one of the two stages, you were never far from a moving art piece or the comedy tent. Most of all, there was something humble and friendly about the Nines that other festivals lack. Maybe it's because it took place so close to my own home, but there was truly something special happening in little Devens. Fingers crossed that it can happen again.

tastemakers