

Festival has Calgary sledding on cool

BY MIKE BELL, CALGARY HERALD JUNE 30, 2009



Steve "Lips" Ludlow and Anvil turn up the volume during Sled Island music festival's main concert at Olympic Plaza Friday
Photograph by: Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald

Review

The Sled Island Festival's Olympic Plaza concert took place Friday night. The festival continues at venues around the city until Sunday.

It's easy to forget.

And often harder to remember.

So when you actually get that reminder that Calgary can be a pretty cool city, an adventurous and even progressive locale, it's all the more notable.

Friday night, right in the heart of the berg built on the backs of conservatism, necks of red and gold of black, that refresher was delivered via Sled Island Festival's mainstage concert in Olympic Plaza--a night and an event that seemed entirely incongruous to the surroundings, but one that you hope remains an annual happening.

The venue itself is one of those things many probably take for granted or gave up on long ago as a result of past experiences or even reputation. But sitting in the shade on a 20 C day in the oasis of concrete and metal there can't help but be a calming feeling of rediscovery. A beer garden helps--although the choice of Pilsner in can or Pilsner in a can is enough to turn Peter O'Toole into a teetotaller--but isn't entirely the root cause of reawakening.

And the music? With all apologies to the Folk Festival, if you can find a more eclectic, intriguing and even odder collection of artists on one stage and in one evening in this city, then you've either stumbled into an alternate universe or the dreams of Michael Green. And as with all festivals, perhaps more so because of the Sled philosophy, it was a hit-and-miss affair, but rarely less than interesting.

Kicking off the evening was local scene veterans The Summerlad--an admirable choice, but perhaps not the most inviting. In front of a crowd of perhaps a dozen, with perhaps another 100 hanging around the perimeter, the art pop trio delivered a set of free-form psychedelia that spanned the range of droning to overly percussive. A great band, but in this particular setting and on this particular day they accomplished little more than chasing the suits back to the suburbs for the weekend.

Switching things up was Quebec band Malajube, which brightened things up considerably. Speaking the universal language of pop music, the Montrealers came across as a less diverse and more Franco Modest Mouse. Their bright songs with sunny melodies were nice, bubbly summer tonic for the growing Island-er audience.

Keeping the good times and happy thoughts going--and taking them to the next level--was old school icon Biz Markie. If you didn't have a smile on your face as the roly-poly MC was doing his thing then you should really stop blaming your parents for your upbringing and get on with your life. The Biz brought the golden age of hip-hop back to life with a far-too-short set that featured him beatboxing his respects to departed '80s icon Michael Jackson and dropping a wonderful version of his own hit Just A Friend. He was an early and easy highlight of the night.

On its own, the rapper's set was hard enough to follow, but taking into account the obvious and at

times painful shortcomings of the act given that task, the Canadian by way of Congo hip-hop crew M5, the drop in energy and dip in audience morale was stunning. Any goodwill afforded them because of their backstory -- escaping the violence in their region and beginning a new life in this country--was quickly used up as many headed back to the Pilsner tubs.

Canadian metal icons Anvil did little to woo anyone back. The thrash pioneers made relevant and apparently interesting by irony and an acclaimed documentary did little to prove their relegation to the annals of metal history wasn't justified, with a set of fanny-pack guitar rock featuring words such as "abomination" that blurred the line between parody and reality.

Blurring the line between excellent experimentation and utter annoyance was Holy F---. The Toronto ensemble creates improv soundscapes through waves of electronica, that's part dance-friendly and part avant-garde sonic nihilism.

New York trio Liars were the second true highlight of the night. With a frontman like Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore coming off of methadone and a jittery, primal punk sound they were the perfect mix of entertaining on the eyes and ears. They jammed so much into their woefully inadequate 45-minute set, you were left as exhausted as you were exhilarated. And eager for more.

Of course, headliners and show-closers The Breeders had to make you wait for it. The only act to stress the Sled Island schedule took the stage 20 minutes late. Good thing they delivered. Despite a reputation for being as erratic as their recorded output, the alt rock band, led by Pixies member Kim Deal and her sister Kelly, were superb.

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