

Rock and a Hill Place Mountain Rock

It's that time of the month.

Time to dig out the sandals, the caffeine and the brown acid, for the event known as a 'rock festival' still takes place under the spiritual cloud of the late 60s and early 70s. See, regardless of how "90s" a multiple-day outdoor concert is billed, it's still destined to have that hippie flavour about it.

The big one on the calendar is *Mountain Rock*. For the past three years it's been held at Woodville, half an hour from Palmerston North. 1995 sees the festival site only 10 minutes from the city, in the heart of the Manawatu Gorge. Obviously you wouldn't want to walk there from Auckland, so on this trip I'm splitting the driving evenly with an expert navigator, Mark Ashbridge from Festival Records.

In the cockpit he's gone basically for the skull motif, y'know, on top of the gear stick and hanging from the mirror beside the fuzzy dice. Finally gassed up and full of air, we're moving. Now, either we took the scenic route or a wrong turn, but our travelling time, including meat pie stops, came close to seven hours and we don't need the sight that greets us upon arrival.

The approach road to the Mountain is in a state of pure chaos. There's only one entrance and the volume of traffic combined with a series of breakdowns has caused a five kilometre jam. After 30 seconds in the queue I'm sick of waiting, having flicked the hazard lights on we wave our passes madly out the window and zoom up the wrong side of the road. Five minutes later we're backstage helping the Greg Johnson Set drink their rider. Our tardiness on the way down means we missed their performance, but smiles all round points to a good time being had by all. Certainly their gig in Hastings the night before went off.

"I had hash, acid and pot, so I was having a great time," said guitarist Trevor Reekie.

Out the front in No Man's Land, scores of the 7,000 strong crowd are looking pretty pissed up already, but no one's causing trouble and the vibe is good.

The lay of the land is very much similar to last year. The view from the stage looks out on to a huge field surrounded by rolling green hills. Around the perimeter at ground level is a collection of stalls selling a whole range of stuff that is just extra baggage to cart around. Much more important is the food. There's a huge marquee where a hangi is operating, and you can pick the dead animal of your choice — they'll even give you extra fat if you ask nicely. This was my pick of the fare. Otherwise there are hot-dogs and chips, American hot-dogs, beef rolls, and a few vegetarian outlets that don't appear to be doing any business. Serves them right.

At 5.30pm Southside of Bombay are up on stage. Their set of Pacific reggae is perfectly timed. 'What's The Time Mr Wolf' gets the biggest of cheers.

Following on is rap group Upper Hutt Posse. Mainman Dean Hapeta has assembled a tight new band and they're cookin'.

All the fav's — 'Whakakotahi', 'E Tu' and 'Ragga Girl' — are given an airing. The only complaint is that it could've been much louder.

The word is that Ted Brown has cancelled — wise too. You can't strum with a broken arm.

Moana and the Moahunters now. The band are funky as can be and the three voices up front are perfectly harmonious. Teremoana goes solo on 'Beautiful People', and later they're joined by former Southside of Bombay vocalist, Ruia Aperahama, for 'Tahi'.

Backstage the facilities have also been upgraded since last year. The bands now have dressing rooms, and a circus-sized tent doubles as a restaurant/bar and media area.

Australian band My Friend The Chocolate Cake are stuck in interview mode prior to going on stage. Lead singer David Bridle admits to shitting bricks as to how a folk act will go down with a rock audience, but their 45 minute acoustic set is lapped up.

There's a bit of a laser show next, but nothing to get excited about unless you were epileptic.

Yothu Yindi look striking, all war paint, didgeridoos and nimble dancers. Frontman Mandawuy Yunupingu controls things from the centre as the band range from rock numbers like the storming version of 'Treaty', to the more traditional arrangement of 'Tribal Voice'. Without much prompting, they perform the first encore of the festival.

As if I wasn't sleepy enough already, on came four totally bogus bands in row. The whole segment was nicely summed up by roadie David 'Wolfbag' Hornblow as "Bob bar in a field".

Shadowplay came from Whangarei. They looked and sounded like a fifth rate Whitesnake. Desert Road have moved further down the road of upmarket provincial pub rock — kind of a Lion Red ad' in the flesh. Any band named after food are worth checking out, but turgid 70s riffers Nacho Mama are more likely to make you bring it up. Finally, Wanganui's Kate And The Lemon Tree. The lead singer of this band spent all afternoon swanning around backstage like he was Zsa Zsa Gabor, then was just as big a tosser on stage. They do the emaciated funk-metal thing while attempting to get overly excited. Perhaps they'll improve if their balls drop.

Okay, by now it's four in the morning. I can't find my friends so there's nowhere to sleep. After borrowing a blanket from the Red Cross, I drag myself under the stage and squeeze in between two gigantic speakers at the front. It ain't the Regent but it'll do.

Six interrupted hours later and Sam Hunt is on the boards directly above me. For some weird reason I can't move my legs, so I remain there right through a punky sounding bunch from Lower Hutt called Lemon Spitfire.

Ex-Warratahs mainman Barry Saunders is in command from the word go. Later he tells

me the police "almost crawled up my ass" while searching his van, but the near miss doesn't seem to have done him any harm. He does a set of mostly new material, and is joined by his son on a beautiful ballad, the name of which I haven't a hope in hell of recalling.

Polly now. Yikes. Remarkably they're even more bland than when I saw them at the Mount. Youth For Christ for thirtysomethings.

Backstage, the Nixons are making preparations. They've borrowed some gear, so the show's on the road. Comparatively, it's a tame set from them today, but the drinkers in the pit whoop it up to bassist Mike Scott's invitation to "have a good time all of the time". Someone returns the favour, passing judgement on his haircut by yelling: "Run Forrest, run."

Maree Sheehan has a collection of great dance tunes, but I'm tired of listening to a DAT bring up the rear. It can't be that difficult to get a decent funky band together and really do the songs justice.

Andrew Fagan's dressed for the weather, in a green skirt and gumboots. Pop songs from *Blisters* dominate the set. Last year Fagan appeared to aggravate sections of the crowd with his between song rants, but this time round they respond with roars.

Earth mother Shona Laing opens with '1905'. I think how clever the Headless Chickens were to use the chorus as a sample and not much else.

Hello Sailor arrive backstage but their gear doesn't, so stand-up comedian Nick Nicholas shares a couple of rude jokes before the lads step up. It all looks and sounds fine to me but the Brazz isn't happy. They run through 'New Tattoo', 'Fugitive For Love' and an awesome version of 'Easy', then Brazier is hit in the head with a full can of beer while his back is turned. During the last chorus of 'Blue Lady' he throws the mic' down and stomps off. Fair enough to.

Much to the delight of the hot and sticky ones, a fire engine is manoeuvred up to the stage and the burning hoards are doused with water for 10 minutes between each band. Great stuff, and y'know some people pay money to see wet T-shirt shows.

The time is 4pm and by now the area around the stage is jammed. Tim Finn steps up and he's nothing short of brilliant. Playing solo, he runs through 'Persuasion', 'Parihaka', 'Weather With You', 'Fraction To Much Friction' and the beautiful 'Many's The Time', before strumming into 'Dirty Creature'. The finale sees Harry and Dave of the Exponents, plus Dave Dobbyn join in for a chaotic version of 'I See Red.'

You can't argue with a rumbling stomach so during the Exponents and the Muttonbirds I head off to check out the grub backstage. Last year a steak sandwich was the only option, and while no one with a brain would scoff at such a tasty morsel, the chefs at Rock IV have laid on a great spread this time. An invitation to join Fagan and band is gratefully accepted and we all slurp down a huge stack of chicken that's so fresh

it appears to fly around your mouth.

Upon arrival Supergroove are herded into the media area for interviews, but they choose to ignore my query as to how they came up with the riff from 'Breakfast In America.' Later, I'm sitting at the bar with bassist Jo Fisher when members of a band called No Thrills stroll up to meet Jo. They tell him that "Paul Russell" from *RipItUp* called them "Supergroove wannabes" in a previous issue.

Jo reassures them by stating "that Russell is a prize cunt."

Supergroove go on to play the best set of the weekend. Breathtaking and stunning and exhilarating and all those other big words that mean the same thing. The opener, 'You Freak Me', sends the crowd into a frenzy that doesn't abate until the sevensome leave the stage. Just incredible. The only spoiler was the behaviour of the security team down in the pit. Two meataxes took great enjoyment from pulling crowd surfers to the front, dropping them to the ground, punching them, then roughing them up on the way out. Organisers should note that the crowd don't pay \$35 to be assaulted by their employees.

As the sun goes down, the crowd number appears to be at a peak. The official estimate is close to 30,000 but a reliable source tells me later only 17,000 paid for the experience.

Backstage, Supergroove are hounded for autographs and photos until they have to leave. I join Karl, Jo, Ian, Nic, a six pack and a bottle of Daniel Le Brun Champagnose right at the top of the hill overlooking the site. The view is glorious and stretches right out to the lights of Palmerston North on the horizon.

Midnight Oil look like ants on the stage, unfortunately we can still hear the music. 'Dull as dishwater,' I think the phrase goes. Peter Garrett flays about like a total spaz, while the band rattles off a few bars of environmental rock in the background. Where are Cold Chisel when you need them.

Thankfully, by the time we're back in the pen the plug has been pulled. Supergroove have to be up at 4.30am the next morning in time to catch the 5am ferry, and I've got an early flight. We decide to pile in the van and leave, all of us disappointed to be missing Dave Dobbyn. Back at the hotel, most eyelids are too droopy to party. Time for just a few drinks, then sleep brings relief.

Tim Finn is sitting in the lounge of the Palmerston North Airport at 10.30 the next morning. We both feel like shit and he suggests a medicinal Steinlager. Sure enough it does the trick. A matchbox that has surely carried Otis Redding, Buddy Holly and Glen Miller takes us to Wellington, and then Tim heads back to Sydney.

Being homeward bound is a good feeling. The Mountain has been a bit of a marathon. Mostly the times were good rather than trying, but the real test is whether you would return the following year. Yes/No? Definitely maybe.

JOHN RUSSELL



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