

Liquid, Lamb & Loudness

STRAWBERRY FIELDS

Raglan, February 24 & 25.

Spinal Tap wrote a song about music festivals and called it 'Stinking Up The Great Outdoors'. There was an element of that at Strawberry Fields — front of stage smelt like a well-worn sock — but the last of this summer's major rock festivals crackled way more than it fizzed.

As usual we're overdue, but this time the blame lies elsewhere. A late rock star interview, combined with rush hour traffic on the southern motorway, means we don't arrive at the Raglan site until just after 7.30pm.

The *RipitUp* chariot is directed down the wrong entrance, so consequently we're chased by a loud-mouthed big bloke in a Hiace van. Pleading innocence and ignorance, we score a couple of passes and head round the back.

The **Hallelujah Picassos** and **Semi Lemon Kola** are sitting in the sun, drinking their riders — both bands played earlier in the afternoon. Twenty feet away, behind the stage, **Andrew Fagan** and band have just finished, and are loading gear into his ambulance.

A quick scout around, and the view is pleasing. Those in charge have got it right this time, meaning, the bands are being treated like kings. Food is dirt-cheap and top class, the coffee's going for free, and the liquor can't be much more than cost-price. On ya.

In the half hour it takes **Moana and the Moahunters** to set up, we sample all the turps on offer and decide on *Waikato* as the brew of choice for the weekend — when in Rome etc.

It's dusk now, and a seat at the top of the lighting tower offers a great view of the sunset and the stage. Moana and band rule, especially bass player Peter Hora who is one viciously funky player. The sweet pop of 'Kua Makona' opens, then Teremoana Rapley moves up front for 'Beautiful People', this flows into Jimmy Cliff's 'Rebel In Me', and later Andrew Fagan joins in for 'I'll Be The One'. The bass goes deep for a wild version of En Vogue's 'Free Your Mind', and by the final two tracks, 'AEIOU' and 'Tahi', the band are cookin' and unstoppable. Great stuff.

There's a bit of playtime going begging, so an inspection of the wicket begins.

This field we're standing in is twice the size of a football pitch, food tents (hooray!) border one side and hippy stalls the other — what those tree-huggers need is a well aimed air strike. The crowd is much younger than the previous year, the place is jumping with teenage girls — the kind that make you raise one eyebrow and attempt to lick the tip of your nose. The black T-shirts are still out in force though, worn mostly by heavy dudes who look like they got out of jail the day

before, but thankfully the cloud of aggression that marred 94's event is absent.

On the way back to the stage I'm side-tracked by two human interest events. There's a bit of fisticuffs going on near the main bar, while across the other side of the stage, in the Red Cross tent, a girl wrapped in muslin and sheepskin is wiggling out madly to a tune only she can hear.

On with the show. While the stage manager's back is turned I sneak up the ramp into the wings to see **Blackjack**, and immediately wonder when they last rehearsed — 1980 perhaps? 'Baby It's You' is lapped up by the crowd, but after 15 minutes of this turgid, dated metal, I'd accept the Van Gogh option rather than enduring further; so I'm happy to be busted and marched off, despite the chorus of laughter from assorted **Pumpkinheads**.

The **Midge Marsden Band** get an excellent groove going on covers of Rockinghorse's 'Southern Moonlight' and 'Love The One You're With' by Crosby, Stills and Nash, but otherwise this blues lark bores the tits off me. Nothing personal.

Not so, **Pumpkinhead**. This was their finest show to date. Every element gelled, all stops were pulled, and the result was the most supreme live performance. With a dazzling light show behind them and perfect sound out front, they roared with intensity and left me speechless. Frontman Brent Milligan is in total control, jumping so that his feet never land where they've been, and singing with so much force you'd think his lungs would burst. New tracks 'Third Eye' and 'Scapegoat' are grand to the extreme, while 'Water' and 'Erase' mesmerise with their equal amounts of melody and madness. Just when you think they're peaking, Brent begins swigging kerosene and blows a series of enormous fireballs that tips the performance over the edge into the realm of something otherworldly. 'Swimming' is pulled from the bag, and they close with a hyperactive tune called 'Nark'. I head for the food stalls just fuckin' stoked!

Up at the rear of the playing field is a kitchen whose proprietors know how to pull a crowd. Out front there's a huge beast of indiscriminate origin roasting on a spit, and a sign marked 'Doubledecker Lamb Sandwiches' leans boldly to the side. Earlier, this delicacy was described by *Herald* writer Russell Baillie as "like holding two pieces of bread and waiting for a sheep to run through the middle".

Shihad are due on right now, but their flight from Wellington was delayed for five hours. They're currently speeding to the festival from the legendary Talofa Motel in the heart of Grey Lynn.

Knightshade come to the rescue. I haven't seen this band since I was at school, when

a borrowed ID got me into the Hillcrest Tavern in 1987. There's no sign of *Our World's* Gayle Ludlow, but 'Out For The Count' is as dramatic as ever tonight, and 'Love and Money' still delivers a hard punch to a booze-riddled brain. 'You Don't Need Me' sounds cool, guitarist Rik Bernards displays his best Tufnel/St. Hubbins moves, and for sure Wayne Elliot's voice hasn't deserted him.

The **Shihad** entourage arrive near the finale of Knightshade's set, and a heavily flurried Jon Toogood dives straight for the coffee. The rush sees him right, and when they open up with a phenomenal new track called 'Gimme', it's magic. The hundreds that had earlier retreated to the relative comfort of tents and trucks, are sucked out to be battered senseless by the Wellington foursome. Churn's 'Derail' and 'Screwtop' have the impact of bombs, and new tunes from *Killjoy* jar bones with their ferocity. Without a doubt, Faith No More should assume the support role.

It's almost four in the morning now, and hard rockers **Scarf** are due on. I saw them support Transvision Vamp a few years ago, and once was enough for a lifetime. A pre-arranged Shihad interview late on Saturday afternoon means we zoom back to Auckland for sleep. Apparently Scarf performed a Queen medley.

The wheels are spinning as we edge down the mud track towards backstage late the next day. **Herbs** have just left the stage and are sparking up in a nearby tent.

An enthusiastic crowd swarms in the pit to see the **Clean**, but only Martin Phillipps has realised there's an audience out there. David Kilgour and Robert Scott spend much of the set huddled around Hamish at the drums. That said, the sun is setting in a most brilliant shade of pink, and the pop charms of the Clean, including a fine version of 'I Wait Around', are the perfect soundtrack.

Some idiot has turned the PA down a notch or two, so it takes until the forth song before **Hello Sailor** really impact. Once again The Brazz™ is sounding glorious, and the band are ship-shape. It's the reggae numbers 'G.M.T' and 'Gutterblack' that top the clap-o-meter, but Harry Lyon's 'You Bring Out The Worst In Me' strikes a blow with the ravers down the front also. Sailor wind up with an awesome extended version of 'Blue Lady', and Graham Brazier reinforces why he is one of only two people I want to hear play the harmonica.

We go on a slow wander as **Tama Renata** races up and down his fretboard. The paddock looks like a battlefield, bodies are strewn everywhere. There's a real mellow atmosphere happening, and the only scary thing is the state of the toilets.

Round the back, we're guzzling beer and coffee, fending off the odd person who wants to know the identity of Elvis Slag, and sheltering from the first drops of rain. I get a nasty look from Diesel's manager after being overheard inquiring: "Is it worth getting wet for that Australian ponce?" Before I can challenge him to an arm wrestle, a can of suds is thrust at me, and I'm pushed out the front.

Diesel makes me want to vomit into my hands. His bland AOR pop/rock performance is accompanied by a mixture of strategic sincerity and fake 'feeling'. His band were big criminals as well; slick like snot, they played without soul or spirit, and didn't bother to mask the looks of total disinterest on their faces. Bizarre then that this glossy, studio-manufactured attempt at soul is cheered to the heavens by the masses. At the finale of 'Right On The Tip Of My Tongue', Diesel says: "Thankyou music lovers." Thumbs down to that one. The only 'music lovers' would be the ones striking a blow for good taste by cutting the power to the main stage.

Shayne Carter's **Dimmer** are well dressed and were invited to "go hard". They did just that. The new rhythm section has improved the band immensely — so much so that you actually discover these are meant to be songs, not just a collection of squeals through which Carter can prove his point. As always, the instrumental 'Crystalator' gets pole position, then the trio dive into a handful of swirling, pounding, almost combustible 'rock' tunes. They had their set cut short due to the late hour, so wrapped it up with Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love'.

Just after 2.30am, Bryan Bell gets his turn. The **Dead Flowers** singer has been backstage for over six hours and looks relieved to be occupied. *Strawberry Fields* was the band's first ever show without bass player Dave James, and Bryan sums it up for everyone when he says: "It's really weird when something that has always been there is gone." It was a mediocre performance from the Flowers tonight, spoiled mostly by a bad mix out front. The usual big-hitters, 'Some Brain Ride' and 'Not Ready', failed to connect, and even the explosive 'What Do You Take Me For' appeared suffocated. The departure of Dave seems to have sapped a chunk of energy from Dead Flowers that his permanent replacement will need to bring back.

The watch chimes four, and we're weary. The trip back to Auckland looms like a monster, but this year *Strawberry Fields* has been a pleasure. The crowd was down on last year, so it's probably too early to ask if the festival will go ahead in 96. The only real question is, which one of us is fit to drive home?

JOHN RUSSELL



Jon Toogood, Shihad Tama Renata

Photos by Jo Crowley