

Sappy Times

TEARING DOWN BUNTING SINCE 2009

MONDAY

(Looking back on Sunday)

AUGUST 5, 2013, FILED FUMBLINGLY AT 7:49 AM

THERE IS A FOREBODING FEELING when at 10:16pm the crew have begun taking apart the carnival games. A grand champion has not yet been named and already here they are, transforming SappyFest's games of glorious chance into rubber ducks and neckties.

If you are reading this, SappyFest 8 is over. It is ended. It is in ruins. You will never get it back.

But I promise it's gonna be ok.

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Sarah Neufeld's set begins and ends with a duet. We are all sitting together in the chapel, dusk dappled on our faces. Colin Stetson is cradling an alto or tenor saxophone. He stands at the edge of the balcony, leaning just forward. The audience below may not know he is there.

Sarah knows; knows without looking. In the stillness she draws her bow across her violin. And again she draws her bow across her violin. The sound is wavering. She draws her bow across her violin.

When she begins to sing, wordlessly and very softly, Colin answers. He answers and joins her, with his horn. He is leaning just so slightly forward, like the figurehead of a ship. She is nimble and stooped. And across the air they are sighing together, not in secret but in secret. Not in secret but in secret: in the way that every intimacy holds a secret.

There are thin reverberations, traveling along the brick.

Harmony is a change and a staying-the-same. Like falling in love, maybe. And sometimes freedom means also carrying something, bringing it with you. These are the thoughts I have, sitting there; but what do I know.

In other places, Sarah's set is fearsome, her white shoe stamping on the floor. Or it's playful, or it's overgrown. There are moments when the stained glass becomes like children's drawing. And then at other times the room feels filled with hardships - a fiddler's saw; a raw, scoured seeking.

When Sarah finishes she takes a breath and the crowd is loudly cheering and she looks as if she needed this.

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Earlier: A black sphere spotlit in the decrepit magnificence of the Sackville Music Hall. And something is ticking.

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I have seen Colin Stetson play many times but still this music feels impossible.

Notes pour out of the saxophone.



FREE!

Continued on the other side of this page.



They are radiant and endless. They are terrifying. Yet the sound is also wounded. That deep, straining voice, sent up from Colin's lungs and throat: furious or lonely, like shearing metal or an animal's groan. This is what makes the hair stand up on people's arms. This is what turns their hearts in their chests. For all the dazzle and skronk, the battery of keys: this old voice, lifted up from somewhere.

It's hard. You can see it, writ upon his body. You can hear it, in a music that is not perfect: breaking breath, squealing reed and spit, cluttered keys. This is a musician of incredible power - yet still frail, frail as any spirit. Frail as SappyFest in its final hours. "Fuckin' A," Colin says, toward the end. "This is rad."

I find I'm watching his eyes. Mostly they are closed. But there are moments when they open, those pale orbs, and they widen and roll back, and I cannot help but think: he is like a great whale, surfacing.

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At SappyFest there is always too much to do. It is not possible to see every act, to visit every squirrel administered cellphone hospital, to glimpse every spotlight sphere. Not if you want to sleep, or eat, or talk with new best friends. Not if you are only able to exist in one place at a time. I hear dazzle-eyed things about shows by Highest Order, Old & Weird, Jon McKiel, Construction & Destruction, and more. I simply was not there. It is in just such a situation that I find myself hearing Monomyth through a floor in the Legion. At this remove, the band sounds like a gurgling giant squid. It sounds distorted and thudding. Someone is banging and banging his head against the wall.

Later, or maybe earlier, the Pictish Trail says he wants to play some thirty-second songs. They have titles like "Birds" and "In Rooms." The Scotsman is humble: "There's a few shit ones," he says. But none of them are shit. They are various and winsome and a woman with blue hair times him to make sure none surpass half a minute. On "Sweating Battery Acid," Pictish delivers 30 seconds of damaged psych-out, like Doldrums if Doldrums were more efficient. Elsewhere he sings earnest, dogged tunes, acoustic or over watery beats. He plays a song from Beck's *Song Reader*. It's sensitive and blaring, beaten and winning. "There are so many good-looking bands here," he says. "In Scotland, if you're good-looking you must be shit at music." All around me, women are mouthing to each other: *I love his accent*.

At Ducky's I hear Max Keenlyside, the ragtime piano-player, who is tall as a reed. His name is old-fashioned and even his fashion-sense is old-fashioned. He ties jangling piano knots: with every sepia song he plays it seems at first like he's figured something out... and then like he's cheerfully tangling it up again.

There's a similar mischief to the way the Luyas sound. It hides in the curl of Jessie Stein's voice, the winking glint on Pietro Amato's french horn. They're a band where each song feels like a separate world. Now mystic winter, now hot jets, now scattering stardust. Almost as soon as they have taken the stage, the full tent is filled even fuller. It's the lure of drums, organ, brass and lapsteel, a companion violin. Jessie Stein like a silent film star - and her band so richly noisy. She hoists her red guitar, her moodswinger, above her head. She plays "50/50" - a song as sure as

edelweiss. She sings a freeform team-up with Chad VanGalen. And then, so suddenly: farewell. Cheekily and cheerily: *Auf Wiedersehen, goodbye*.

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The finale of SappyFest 8 is the sheer splendid sound of Naomi Shelton and the Gospel Queens. This band is 10,000 candlepower and 10,000 flowers and a vault full of good news. Dancing gospel, loud as ~~hell~~, spirits as gladly free as a bell ringing in a steeple. As soon as we've welcomed the headliners into the Bridge Street tent I feel like they've pulled some swap and they are welcoming *us*, and reigning like a glorious weather.

There's ticking gold guitar and ticking silver drums. The Queens, in white, with voices like thrown rice; Naomi, in blue, with a voice that's hoarse from loving too much. We dance. It's beautiful loose gospel and all of us dance to this hormone high. Before long, all of us have turned into miracles. "Thank you!" Naomi keeps repeating. "Thank you so much! Thank you kindly!" It's confusing: why is she thanking *us*?

She blows kisses like a grandma. Like a grandma when we're loading up the car, when we're packing it in, when we're getting ready to go home. When we're readying for the end of the greatest festival in the world. She blows kisses because she knows something we don't want to know.

But now that it's Monday, the ruins are unavoidable. Sagging banners, snipped balloons, a clutch of ragged memories. SappyFest 9? *Don't get your hopes up*. In fact, forget hope altogether. To make things we have to make them, w hard work & kindness.

Let's. 