

Sappy Times

IN SERIOUS NEED OF AN EDITOR SINCE 2009

MONDAY

(Looking back on SUNDAY)

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PEOPLE ARE MOSHING to Basia Bulat. Not a couple A-holes: a whole pit of heaving bodies, boys and girls, turning Basia's "Gold Rush" into a riot. She's the one who incited it. She's the one who asked us to. This gentle-seeming blonde woman played a song on a charango and then a song on an autoharp and then she asked SappyFest to mosh and so we did.

There isn't as much moshing on the other songs. There's none on "Never Let Me Go". As gracious as Basia may be, as cheerful and smiling, she is not playing a game. That vast voice - for a time she is searching, then begging, then she is a whippoorwill whipping whoop & melancholy through the tent. In a new song, in the middle, Basia sings the words, *Come back*. Her eyes are fixed on a horizon and her sorrow is white-hot.

Long before, I am in the Vogue Theatre. Didn't this place used to be green? It used to feel like a grotto, an

undersea den. Now re-painted, in red and white, it feels like a pavilion where they hand out trophies; somewhere for spelling bees or a shabby coronation.

First we hear Spencer Burton, who used to be called Grey Kingdom. He ceded his land. He has tattooed sleeves, jeans, a big beard, a Hercules heart. He has a forehead like the Atlantic ocean. So he tells us: "I'd literally tell you anything," he admits. "You know - personal shit." Between songs he is a comedian; the personal shit is all punchline, all bullseye, *WEBJAMIN*². But between the jokes are the songs, and here the personal shit is solemn. It is impossibly beautiful. These are new and old folksongs, murder ballads and "Wild Mountain Thyme". Spencer sings like no other, quiet as a mouse.

It is strange to think that Spencer Burton and Steve Lambke have the same job. That both are musicians, singers and songwriters. And Tamara Lindeman too, and Michael

Feuerstack, Basia, Rae Spoon: all making unmistakable originals as they work the same job, doing what they can do with what they got.

Steve, who is Baby Eagle, has a creaky voice. He sings a sentence, and a sentence, and half a sentence. They are softly spoken songs, almost misshapen. Fading poetry, with images that become and retreat. His guitar-playing is bare as a brook. He tries to sell us his Plymouth Acclaim. "We retired in the morning / with a curtain swaying in the window," he sings. "It slowly fills with the good light." I imagine it, I imagine it there, as clear a shape as if he had traced it in my palm.

And then Tamara, who is the Weather Station, who is an indisguisable shade of twilight. Her voice rushes from low notes to soprano. Her songs are plainer than Baby Eagle's, sparser than Spencer's. They seem grave; poised, ready to turn away. Shotgun Jimmy sits down

FREE!

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at the drums and fills some of them fast highhat, quickening blood. Tamara sings about "a kind of distance that we could not cross", and this notion seems unimaginable here. We are all beside each other.

Do not forget: the sun on Sun-day was aptly punishing. For a little while I hid in the chilled shade of Ducky's, listening to Fred Squire's unbilled set, the way his old songs felt dry and air-conditioned. But first I watched 22 black-clad choirists screaming before a church. Their screams were sirens, cackles, squeals, chirps, orgasms, groans. This Scream Choir was taking back past agonies, reclaiming old horror - screaming for the plain sake of it, unfettered.

When they were done, as an encore, we shrieked back at them. Then they chattered among themselves, hoarse.

With beach toys wafting limply across the crowd, Shotgun and Jaybird once again take flight. "Washed up, haggard, handsome old fools," they say. (They are mistaken about three of these adjectives; I won't say which.) It is so good to have this duo back: dented lines about back yards and settling down, Fred all nonchalant cool, Jimmy singing bigmouthed into a drumkit mic. When they swap places the guitar gets chuggier, the rhythms crisper. A different kind of tenderhearted laconic. A different kind of tonic. It is telling that Shotgun and Jaybird harmonize most sweetly as they sing the words, "for nothing".

Our MCs are literally throwing candy into the crowd. Soon enough, Michael Feuerstack is figuratively throwing

candy into the crowd. He is playing with most of the Olympic Symphonium: broad-shouldered men who seem like they would be able to score a touchdown, build you a deck, carry your casket. Lap steel, upright bass, guitars acoustic and electric; earlier the Symphonium played campfire songs, and it was roasting outside. They traded instruments like they were passing each other the cranberry sauce, the mashed potatoes. Easy as a holiday.

Now Michael Feuerstack is passing out liquorice. Figuratively. Here at nighttime, with this band, Mike's songs are confident splendours. They are secrets revealed. Each line seems like an opened riddle. Here in lifesavers-coloured light, these songs seem perfect.

But there *are* swing-dancers. In the front row of the mainstage crowd: messy swing, shaggy swing, distracting narcissists with a captive audience. Soon I am singing a hateful song. I like dancing, lovers, & dancing lovers, but this is one lindy hop too far.

And yet while I am gritting my teeth, imagining earthquakes, avalanches, a plague on the house of swing, the problem solves itself. Vain swing-dancers need space to move, somewhere to show off their tacky anachronism. Space is the very thing that's disappearing. With every passing minute, the throng before the stage grows thicker. The cheering cheerers crowd in. Michael Feuerstack is a beacon, everyone wants to smell him. On the third night of SappyFest, the best festival in the world, we're gonna go sardine.

By the time Lucas welcomes the Cons, all of SappyFest has gathered in a crush below white canvas. We are

jostling. We are drinking. We are yelling happy things into each other's ears. *Welcome the Constantines!!!* and then the Constantines are *here*, right there on stage, and we yell so hard the lights change. Guitars; drums. GUITARS, DRUMS. Listen! A heroism's rolling in. There's a parade of crowdsurfers waiting here in the audience and we don't even know it yet.

Nighttime / Anytime
It's all right

Yes it's all right, yes anytime, yes nighttime; our five friends are back and they're older, they're better, they're playing the same wild notes on this raw new night. They're playing like deliberate maniacs. I look around: our fan faces seem thundered and radiant, banging heads at every beat. Steve is a wild ghost. The band are all wild ghosts. No, not ghosts - alive, just flying. "TURN IT UP!" yells Bry Webb's mom, dressed in scarlet. And again: "TURN IT UP!" And again. Some of Bry's lyrics sound different now, in 2014: words like "history", "young", "yesterday". Crowdsurfers are jumping. They're floating. "Hotline Operator" is torrid & gliding & the Constantines land the ending; of course they do. They land every ending, grinning. The five men are balletic up there, sending upraised signals to each other, shouting semaphore at us. We lift our hands in surrender. We have surfers on or fingertips. Deafened, happy. And look there where it's Paul from PS I Love You, singing. Look where it's Will, Steve, Doug, Bry and Dallas; look: Lucas, Basia, Tamara, Leigh, Jimmy, leaping. Sappy's founders, too, somewhere, with thunder & lightning. All the gathered young lions. All the scattered ones.

A tent of lions. A town. (A pride.) *✂*