

Sappy Times

STAYING UP TOO LATE SINCE 2009

SATURDAY

(Looking back on Friday)

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ONE YEAR AFTER THE last SappyFest, SappyFest is happening again. It seems so simple when I put it like that. No matter the changes and crises, toasts and roadshows, too many goodbyes – four seasons later here we simply are. We are on Bridge Street, embracing old friends; we are under stage lights, playing our hearts out; we are drinking drinks and fondling merch and we are smooth operators at the Legion's shuffleboard table.

If you are new to Sappy: welcome. If you are old at it: welcome back.

Going into Friday, there was gossip. Rumours about the size of this year's SappyFest stage, the sizes of its tents; speculations about measurements, like lewd locker-room whispers. Goldilocks problems: *too big, too small, just right.*

None of this mattered as the Kids Corner Power Jam clambered up before us, insouciant and brave, inaugurating a space that seemed vast,

enormous, wide enough to contain whole decades of ambition, expectation, and dreams of rock'n'roll.

Their band was called The Others. Their opening number was like Katy Perry's "Fireworks" riddled with silver bullets, shot 'til it was staggering. The next had flecks of electric guitar and dogged violin, like John Cale jamming with the Ventures; it had a locked bass/drum groove and synths like a sighing kitty-cat. The Others have many permutations. They are a collective, a schoolhouse, a social scene. "The Sun Shimmers and Shines" was a maraca-kissed duet, a song that coasted out like a baby blue convertible and also like a unicorn. On another song, The Others were just three boys: a drummer, a bassist, and a distinguished gentleman in an orange cap, playing guitar like he was lighting tiny fires. There were no words: these dudes needed no words. The racing bass said it all; the tom drum; those tiny fires.

Much later, Freelove Fenner played short songs on fancy amps. A trio with a sound like a deserted resort; an electric music that my dumb brain always hears as hot *and* cool, 40°C and 2°F. All those sweet, sinewy guitar parts. Vectors of melody like jet planes' vapour plumes. The drums are trying to teach us algebra. I am reminded of the way complicated signals can travel along slender wires, the way a cat's cradle can tell a story.

This year's SappyFest logo has a strikethrough, ~~a strikethrough~~, as if it's been cancelled. *SappyFest isn't happening. SappyFest is off. Its future is ambiguous at best.* This is sleight of hand: advertising the festival by reminding people of its inevitability.

~~SappyFest~~, crossed out, feels like a dare. Or maybe like a nightmare. *Imagine if this went away.* Nothing is destined; nothing is guaranteed. This festival exists because people made it.

FREE!

The Times continues on the other side of this page.

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Before he takes the stage, PS I Love You's Paul Saulnier balances a cup full of beer on his head. He sits on a cement barricade and the beer sits on his head and both are poised perfectly, perched in calm equilibrium, like different kinds of angels.

At the corner of Main Street and Willow Lane there is a blue city sign which appears to indicate that SappyFest is a lighthouse.

The Grubbies are a clean-cut trio. I say "clean-cut" although their drummer has a beard and he's a barbarian called Dr Guitar. The *music* is clean-cut. The guitarists are Paul-and-John-ing on duelling vocals. They are John-and-George-ing on dun & orange guitars. One of them has polkadot pants and the other does not.

At times the Grubbies are a little louder - shades of the sets still to come - but they always keep smiling. They are chums with amplifiers and a ready crowd, playing Halifax garage pop.

At this point you may be wondering what a Halifax garage is like. Don't worry: I am a journalist. I asked my friend Ryan. "Wide, with a very traditional door," he revealed. "More horizontal than vertical patterns, I'd say."

I always tell people: Try to have *real* conversations at SappyFest. Ask a stranger the biggest lesson she learned this year. Ask a friend how he knew when to give up on his dream. Inquire with one of the generous souls selling merch: "What's the most precious thing you have ever sold?" Ask yourself whether you should buy another beer or instead that cool EP or chapbook by a band, by a poet, by

someone just scraping by.

Port-A-Potty Tip of the Day

Visit a Sappy honeypot while a rock band is playing and the whole plastic structure will be buzzing like a hive and you will finally understand what it would be like to be a guitar string.

Dusted unfurl a kurt vileous twilight, a vangaalen sunset. After Freeloze Fenner's bare intricacy it all feels so lush - drenched and elegiac. They raise up groves of radiant guitar, psychedelic road-songs. Brian Borchardt's falsetto is like a flashlight.

It helps that it's dark out, now. The sun goes down and a switch goes off in all of us, maybe. Daytime's been cancelled. Afternoon is ~~done~~.

Later, at the Legion, it feels like yet another switch has been thrown. There was day, then night, and now some other thing, some time that's later than night but not yet morning. The room is all silhouettes. It's loud. Motherhood are playing sewer-black country blues. Some people are nodding and some are shaking their heads, and they each repeat the gestures endlessly, compulsively: either *yes yes yes* or *no no no* to this blackened hell-damned groove.

Earlier, when PS I Love You played, their singer/guitarist made the "least rock'n'roll request of all time": *less fog, please*. He didn't explain why he wanted someone to pull the plug on the fog machine. He simply asked, politely, for the fog to go away. *We will do this clear-eyed*, I imagined him saying. *No tricks, no diversions*.

During "For Those Who Stay", a guy

in the audience decided not to stay. He left, got up, staged the mildest crowdsurf of all time.

PS I Love You are at their best when they are underestimated. That odd couple: one small, one big. Single-minded drums and a faltering voice. Playing his solos, Paul is like a wizard who can turn any one thing into anything else: a piece of paper into a bobbing swan, a \$20 bill into a basement apartment. He plays a guitar solo one-handed, one-and-a-half-handed, nine-handed, even behind his back. The sound produced seems unrelated to the figures of his fingers. The tiniest pluck and strum conjures a dam, a dragon, a wheeling sun; draws a strikethrough across this night. He can depress a pedal and transform the texture of the air - make it tranquil or stormy, rough or silken, fill our tent with fog. Maybe that's why he doesn't need a machine. Maybe he uses his own.

Then at a certain hour, peeled away from everything, I walk back along a path. It is almost too dark to see. A cold wind passes between Sackville's houses and over the back of my neck. The air is damp and I smell new leaves. I hear a lone cicada. I hear a lonely dog.

Suddenly: a woman on a magic carpet is gliding down the middle of the road. She is captured in the glow of her cellphone, levitating two feet above the asphalt, and the carpet is gorgeous, Persian, all knots of blue and violet.

The woman is texting her friend. *BRING IT ON HOME*, she types. I hear her whisper it to herself, *Bring it on home*. I try to ignore her but I find I am whispering it back, like a greeting, like it's her name. 🐦