

SAPPY TIMES

Saturday

August 1, 2009

There is a symphony of honks coming from the parked cars and there is a line-up for the barbecue and this is the beginning or close-to-the-beginning of Sappyfest number four; and did I mention there is a honky sonata coming from beside the Struts gallery and I am from Montreal but flew to Moncton from Calgary and Ian Sappy picked me up at the airport and brought me here where it is the kind of clear, hot day where arrows shoot straight, unless they catch the wind, and then they hit friends.

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Sappyfest's main stage is inside a large tent. There is a yellow line down the middle of the floor, but Sappyfest is not a highway and here you are allowed to cross yellow lines. The stage is covered in flowers, as if someone nearby fired rockets filled with gardenia-seed. The first band that plays is called Motion Ensemble. They play an excerpt from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' "Maps" and it is beautiful & wrong. Later the Adam Mowery Organization come out and they remind me how good rock'n'roll sounds. This seems like a stupid comment but really, honestly: rock'n'roll sounds really good. It is a hot, lazy & idle afternoon and then a band from Saint John comes along with two bright red guitars and they make

such a happy, wild racket, and holy shit does it sound good, this old sound. There are two ladies in front of me, with hearing aids, and they love it too. Everyone loves rock'n'roll.

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In the field there is a woman called Anne MacMillan, shooting rockets. Her rockets sprinkle dandelion-seed across the field and then drift to earth on little blue parachutes. After they have landed, they keep moving. The parachutes jerk and drag the rocket-husks. They are like jellyfish, in the grass. I say this out loud and a man from Prince Edward Island tells me that in Prince Edward Island it is indeed jellyfish season. Sappyfest has already taught me so much.

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Later, I realize that Bry Webb's voice is magnetic. I mean that it is compelling to listen to but also that it sounds as if it is made of whatever substance magnets are made of; grey-silver, heavy, gleaming. The Harbour Coats play songs that seem like they ought to be arena anthems — but they're not. They are quiet. They glow and flicker.

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Smoke unfurls from the machine beside them. "*Once she's kissed you / you stay kissed,*" Webb sings. "*Sometimes desire / is like the sparkle on a street-car wire.*"

\$100 are a quintet that play country rock. They play it very well, led by a woman who is as serious as rosemary. The highlight for me is a song called "Black Gold". The highlight for the man beside me is the guitarist's beard. "That's probably the best beard I've ever seen," he says.

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Bands that sing particular words very well:

Motion Ensemble — "*baby*"

Adam Mowery Organization — "*carrot-patch*"

Harbour Coats — "*persistence*"

Eric's Trip — "*you*"

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Old Man Luedecke is not as old as I expected, but he does play his music sitting down. He receives a hero's welcome when he comes out, hoisting a banjo with one new and four old strings. He sings brambling, thumping tunes, broken-hearted and alive. The tunes are also plain, populist, un-curlicued. Everyone can get behind a song about group breakfasts, airport kisses or quitting jobs. It's what old-time and country music so often do well, reminding us of the stuff we all have in common. "Bringing up the rear-guard," he sings, and even the festival's most avant-garde beatniks tap their feet.

Burning Hell go for a similar populism, only they do it with nine more people (and later, also a didgeridoo).

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Eric's Trip are the best band to play on the first night of Sappyfest number four. This is predictable, obvious, but also reassuring. Did you know they only play about once a year? You would never know it. Their electric guitars are like hot smoke cutting through less-hot smoke. The drumming is as good as any rock drumming I have ever heard in my life. It is fearsome and very fast. I am too ignorant & young & stupid to really know Eric's Trip's songs but these songs I do not know, released more than a decade ago, feel crucial to my existence tonight. They are loud and kind. They are better than all that other new indie grunge stuff. Who needs that new indie grunge stuff? Can't I just listen to Eric's Trip instead? Are there Eric's Trip records for sale here? I will look.

Eric's Trip's members are each having a different conversation with the music. They are each learning something different from the playing of these songs. They are each one quarter of a fortune.

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I have a doppelganger here. I learn this in two ways. First someone said "Hey!" to me, and then when I said "Yes?" they suddenly got disappointed and said "Oh." They said they thought I was someone else. Then later in line at the barbecue (not the barbecue outside the gallery — the barbecue near the stage) someone started massaging my shoulder. I didn't quite know what to do. I said: "Uh." Then the man said "Oh." He said I looked just like his friend, that his friend even wears the same clothes as me.

I wonder if around Sackville everyone has a doppelganger; a twin on the other side of the waterfowl reserve. Perhaps there is a rival festival, Passyfest, with bison and lentil burgers instead of beef and portobello. This is okay because the sky is big enough for both of us and there are more than enough songs to go around. I hope Passyfest's logos are as nice as Sappyfest's, and that their singers too have magnets in their voices. 🍷