

The DCMF LISTENER

Sunday

(looking back on Saturday)

July 18, 2010

The thing about an annual festival is that it's a birthday every time. Happy birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday, Dawson City Music Festival.

My second day in Dawson begins with ukuleles. I am sitting in an 111-year-old theatre, a place of wood slats and incandescent bulbs, listening to a quintet of ludicrous tiny guitars. Ukes are like oranges: you can't only half-use them. Pat LePoidevin builds his songs carefully, layering harmonies like superimposed slides. Tune-Yards' Merrill Garbus exercises both strum and thump, coo and bellow. Two thirds of Elliott BROOD strum furiously, raising their voices to the rafters. "In the south and west," they say, "they have duelling banjos. These are cooperating ukuleles." And yet for all these impromptu pleasures, the highlight of the workshop is the wry, dry melancholy of Mathias Kom. His songs are unhurried. They are funny without being stupid, funny without being quirky. He plays small chords on his instrument and tells us about performing to an empty room, to an audience of chairs. Today, there is a line-up out the door. Every chair has someone sitting in it, applauding.

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For the past two days, people have asked me: *Which acts should I definitely not miss?* And, always, I told them: *Tune-Yards.*

FREE!

Now I am paying the price. At the Palace Grand, the line-up stretches around the block. (There was the same obstacle for the Harbourcoats, whose unfurling songs I heard in New Brunswick last year, and Burning Hell, whom I have never heard; I regret missing both.) I do not know what to do. Dawson City, a proud democracy, will not make exceptions for some troublemaking Quebec journalist. I respect this. I gaze at the line. The sun is lowering in the sky, casting shadows that run for miles. I decide to sit.

In the glorious slow sunset, crouching on the kerb, I listen to Tune-Yards through the Palace Grand's front door. I hear Vish introduce them, and I hear the crowd's applause for Merrill Garbus and Nate Brenner. I think: the audience doesn't know what they are in for. I imagine the rows of chairs and a hundred patient smiles.

There are several wonders in Tune-Yards' music: that these are songs made by just two people, with electric bass, looped uke, tom, drumstick, voice; that these songs are so good, so full of hook and jubilation, and boogie; that such hooky, jubilant, boogieing songs can be beautiful, both bold and gentle, and a little bit wise. Also, that Merrill can sing like that. It is music of gunpowder, brown sugar, tire-rubber, fizz. I am sitting on the kerb but the crowd's whoops come flurrying all the way out the front door. In the road's dust I etch an exclamation mark.

(Continued on the other side of this page.)

At Diamond Tooth Gertie's, there are two singers, a pianist, a drummer, and four Gold Dust Girls. This is the floor show. My friend and I are gobsmacked. We are enjoying it ironically, but also sincerely. I am always impressed by small extravaganzas. Beside the stage, a gigantic yak (I think it's a yak) has been mounted on the wall. He is black, with doleful eyes. A sign reads: "In loving memory of Ranger Vern Spangler." My first foolish thought is: *That's a strange name for a yak.*

Things they did not have in Dawson City circa 1897: avocados, free jazz, wi-fi, burritos, Elfin Saddle.

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There is a moment during the "Far Out" workshop, which is in fact quite close-by, in the Gazebo, under drizzling clouds, that Merrill Garbus begins to imitate Matana Roberts. Here is the thing: Merrill is using her voice, Matana is using an alto saxophone. Matana sounds a solo, loose and burred, free. Merrill licks her lips and sings the same thing back, fast. It is a conversation in trills and squeaks and piping *loolooloo*. In the grass, some kids begin to giggle. But the women's call and answer is not easygoing, tisket-tasket - it's tough somehow. It's determined. It's generous and certain. Then Nate Gage's bass begins to lope, and the rest of Elfin Saddle and Tune-Yards pick up, and it's as if they're laying the groundwork for a new city - stringing the electric lights, building the boardwalk, filling the pipes with water. It is an improvisation that creates its own place. We are far out. Emi Honda is playing the musical saw.

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Elfin Saddle are a cute band, modest and ramshackle. But appearances can be deceiving. They play at St Paul's Church, below a sign that says *HE HAS RISEN*. There is a Greek alpha on the wall, and an omega. The church-hall seems to want us to remember about all that

apocalypse stuff. This is okay; this is apt. Because Elfin Saddle's strange folk songs, with rattling drum-kit, broken accordion, glockenspiel and double-bass - they are frequently, unexpectedly terrifying. There is drone. There are chords that make you go: oh shit. Elfin Saddle sing about mountain gods, river spirits, creatures that live in the earth; and you imagine these rising up, like the church banner promises, and sweeping us all away.

Then again, at another moment, Elfin Saddle are playing a Japanese-language avant-garde folk song, and the whole room claps along.

Before Elfin Saddle, there is Jessica Viens, who calls herself A Young Linthead. She reminds me of Josephine Foster and Ella Fitzgerald, except that she's a girl from Edmonton and Dawson City. These are young, bare songs, but this is no complaint: verses about love and confusion work better without adornment, without too much polish. I like her phrasing, her tenacity, how her big voice whips around the room. I like that she whistles in church. In this chapel, the lyrics are sometimes difficult to pick out. They blur, like prayers. "I'm as licked as skunk," she sings. In her seriousness, she smiles.

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Sasquatch Prom Date are a rockabilly band in rockabilly uniform. They have quiffs and sharp suits. They know this music is best suited to close quarters, to darkness; they gather the crowd close. At one point they play Bo Diddley's "Who Do You Love". We clap along, unable to resist it. There is sorcery to the Bo Diddley beat. A few weeks ago, I wondered what Bo Diddley was like in concert. I found videos on YouTube. They were beyond thrilling - heartbusting, lunatic breathless. Perhaps in 50 years, someone will wonder what the Dawson City Music Festival was like. They will go hunting for videos on YouTube. And then they will realize that the DCMF is still going. It has not stopped. People are still dancing by the Klondike, staggering home under the sun. 