



RV • EE with The Runner Road at CampFire Sounds



info@free103point9.org
www.free103point9.org

The Wire
– Adventures in Modern Music
September 2006

Campfire Sounds 2006 Festival FREE103POINT9 WAVE FARM

ACRA, USA

"Who wants to carry a harp down a hill?" asked one of Stars Like Fleas' myriad performing members, shortly after the Brooklyn sometimes duo, sometimes-sprawling collective finished the first of their two sets early Saturday afternoon. They had to move from the second to the main stage, no mean feat considering the latter was less a stage than a small clearing beside a thick-trunked tree about half a mile up the hill. The performance had been well worth the trek, both for onlookers and the harp, guitar, xylophone, violin, cello, flute, sax, keyboard, drums and wind chime-carting Fleas. Minus electricity, and thus shorn of their usual sub-surface buzz and drone, the group more than compensated with a boost in bleating unadorned melody, stretches of silence (or at least no music, as leaf rustle and amazingly well-timed bird caws plugged the gaps) and playful resourcefulness, exploiting the percussive possibilities of twig snapping and tree-as-drum to the fullest. An early festival high point, the set, perhaps more than any other, encapsulated what is so novel about Campfire Sounds; that is, the placement of avant folk acts heavily reliant on software and gadgetry (and mostly hailing from densely packed urban areas) into a summer idyll setting.

Now in its second year, Campfire Sounds is somewhat of an anomaly among events at Wave Farm, the experimental internet radio station. free103point9's second home (after Brooklyn). There is less bias for the recondite and the theoretical, or "Transmission Arts", as founders Galen Joseph-Hunter and Tom Roe have named their primary focus, and more space for artists packing honest-to-goodness songs. That isn't to say that Campfire Sounds lacks for experimentation, or that other Wave Farm events like Spectral Garden or the frequent exploratory Webcasts are classroom cold, just that this is the fest most apparently suited to

spreading down blankets, lighting up the grill, or simply disappearing into one of the property's numerous hammocks to the tune of a uniformly agreeable roster of acts.

The lush acreage of Wave Farm is located in the Catskill Mountains, about a two and a half hour drive from New York City. The safe remove from anything urban seemed to put outfits like the feral freak-act Bunnybrains in their proper place and further extract the organic sounds and sylvan themes that groups such as The Fleas and The Dust Dive explore in their instrumentation and lyrics on record. The Dust Dive's Bryan Zimmerman went so far as to wear his environment, draping himself with bog grime and megaphoning his poignant little-boy-lost vocals, accompanied by original member Laura Ortman's plaintive violin, while knee-deep in a pond for his group's first set. Afterwards, Zimmerman complained of baby leeches that had tumbled down his shirt but that had, admirably, led to no interruptions.

Melanie Moser kicked things off on the generator-powered main stage with some lightly strummed folk in the Sandy Denny mould, decorated with effects pedal loops and some awkward George W Bush sound clips. A second Dust Dive set and one of several gap-filling DJ sets from Roe who, in keeping with the festival's unbuttoned looseness, stuck mostly to recognizable reliables from the rock world, led to an atmospheric, sound-dense performance from the decidedly un-folk (avant, freak, or otherwise) Latitude/Longitude. Battling the threat of rain and a finicky power source, the NYC duo still managed to distance themselves from the other acts through the attention to detail exhibited in their maze-like, peculiarly haunting treks.

Stars Like Fleas' choice timing, right as the newly bright sun began lowering behind a distant Catskills mountaintop, would have excused and even made a sub-par set magical, but the group stole the show with a transcendent performance, with not one of the dozen or so members' joyous contributions wasted. Uninterested in mere complacent layering, they offered the urgency and surprise of a more earnest Akron/Family. Unison chants of refrains such as "*forever always*" remained bearable thanks purely to their charisma.

Following a head-scratching mindfuck circus show from Beefheart disciples Bunnybrains, experimental guitarist Gown delivered Campfire Sounds' loudest shockwaves, his delayed fingerings cresting into glassy, torrential sheets of echoing chaos. More in line with his collaborations with Thurston Moore (under the name Bark Haze) than his frequent Christina Carter teamings, Gown's maelstrom left noise-leaning onlookers in awe and more than a few neighbors undoubtedly poking their heads out of their farmhouses in confusion many acres away. Rain delays bumped Samara Lubelski and MV + EE with The Bummer Road's sets past the midnight hour, welcome luck especially suited for the former's fragile, whispery musings. Lubelski, dimly lit by only a few surrounding tiki torches, plucked and whispered tunes some degrees removed from her work with groups like Hall Of Fame and Metabolismus.

With an audience roughly three or four times the size of 2005's and with the continuing expansion of the Farm (a new study centre opens in 2007), it's likely that this young festival will see several more years. More fun, depending on your definition of the word, than the typical free03point9 happening, it wasn't exactly Woodstock hedonism. As at the station's installation or sculptural transmission sessions, artists tried to somehow incorporate the acoustics of the bucolic surroundings, with varying degrees of success. Radios wedged into trees scattered across the property and tuned in to the live broadcast of the event, saturated the entire farm with the crackling tones, in a perfect gesture of union between microradio and fringe music.

JUSTIN STEWART