

Rainforest festival on a high note

Features - July 17, 2005

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For various reasons, most Malaysian-organized music festivals seldom see overwhelming turnouts.

The exception is the Sarawak Tourism Board-organized Rainforest World Music Festival (RWMF), which is now attracting crowds that run into the five digits.

Already in its eighth year, the RWMF has come a long way.

During its first and second years, only about 400 people attended the festival. The setup - from the sound system to the stage setting -- was pretty basic back then.

The turnouts got bigger over the years and now it is a popular international music and tourism event.

As in previous years, the three-day festival this year was held at the Sarawak Cultural Village in picturesque Santubong, a one-hour drive from Kuching, the capital of Sarawak (Malaysia Borneo).

The festival is a celebration of musical and cultural diversity.

This year, 12 foreign acts (who came from as far as Colombia and Mongolia) and four Malaysian acts performed for 5,000 people on the first day, 8,000 on the second day and 7,000 on the third day.

The crowds were a good mix of foreign tourists and Malaysians, including many veterans from previous festivals.

Due to some problems with overcrowding last year, organizers capped attendance at 8,000 a day.

There were numerous highlights during the festival, which was divided into daytime workshops and night concerts.

The festival's visitors included hippies, eccentrics of all types and the chic and the beautiful. They took part in workshops held each day at the different Sarawakian ethnic houses scattered around the village.

The workshops were casual, basic, impromptu and people-centric. Moreover, they allowed visitors to get up close with the musicians and performers, who provided insights into their music, cultures and traditions.

Some visitors even got to play native musical instruments, some with long traditions passed down through the generations.

The workshops also had their humorous moments. Among them was when The Foghorn Stringband from the U.S. provided a taste of their early bluegrass music and taught the audience how to square dance.

Particularly lively and physical were Ivory Coast's eight-member group Yelemba D'Abidjan, who rocked the house.

Their strong movements and funky traditional music were hypnotic. Audience members were still shouting for an encore long after the show had ended.

The music and dancing of Italy's four-member Acquaragia Drom featured numerous influences, but still created a distinct traditional Gypsy flavor in their performances.

When violinist Erasmo Treglia and Jew's harp-player Elia Ciricillo performed a mock fight-dance sequence, the testosterone soared in the house. Their machismo shone through their nifty, at times goofy, moves.

The workshops, loosely deconstructed notes, rhythms, melodies and beats in unplugged sessions, proved more intimately entertaining than the proper, carefully choreographed nighttime concerts.

Mellow traditional music filled the air on the first night of the festival.

Belize's Florencio Mess and the Maya K'ekchi' Strings' organic, harp-driven music was lushly melancholic.

Their melodious music was deemed subversive in their home country when a strong Christian movement thrived there.

The group gave a heartfelt performance, in their spirit of preserving Mayan culture and music for future generations.

Poland's six-member Shannon came on later to rock the crowd with their Celtic-tinged music combined with Polish cultural influences.

There was some irony in the performance, mostly from Polish Marcin Ruminski's admirably skillful playing of the imminently Scottish bagpipe, which he played like he stole.

The second night, Pakistan's Faiz Ali Faiz, together with eight musicians, performed ethereal *qaw-wali* music characterized by strong insistent voices, with a small backing chorus, clapping hands and propulsive percussion. The performance was soul-stirring and

emotionally tumultuous.

On the third night, The Foghorn Stringband only had to make a passing mention about their music being appropriate for square dancing, before some of the audience shot up and began kicking up their heels.

Every year the festival's finale is highly anticipated, but for some reason it lacked energy and a spontaneous kick this year.

The coming together of all the musicians and performers to jam onstage was overly choreographed, unlike previous years where this final jam bowled over audiences with its earthiness.

Nevertheless, the festival succeeded in entertaining and left the audience wanting more.

Box Coming back for more

The RWMF is known for attracting repeat attendees, and this year was no exception. Here's what several repeat visitors had to say about this year's festival.

"I attend the festival mostly for the company of people. The lineup of acts also matter and they are different each year, so it exposes you to different types of music. I'd attend the festival next year; doing so is like an annual pilgrimage for me." -- Joyce Lim (from Malaysia), quality assurance analyst.

"The festival is different each year. I love the performers who come from around the world, their diversity and their combination of old and new musical instruments and music. This year, the festival is well-organized with better lighted walkways around the village. I'd absolutely return to the festival again -- money permitted." -- Jill Turley (from New Zealand), journalist

"In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, heck around the Southeast Asia region, there's nothing like it. The festival's headliners are world class. However, this year's acts performed more mellow than upbeat music, unlike what I heard when I attended the festival two years ago. Regardless, this year's acts are good. I'd attend the festival next year and after as well, because it has good vibes." -- Dylan Ong (from Malaysia), conservationist.