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The jam session during the finale
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REVIEWS

8th Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival

July 8-10, 2005
Sarawak Cultural Village
Kuching, Sarawak
Malaysia

As the curtains closed on the 8th Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival, 17 groups from across the globe jamm on stage to a rousing finale no one wish to end. The three nights of revelry saw sparkling performances highlighted by the likes of Polish band Shannon with their Celtic music set to cathartic thrash metal histrionics; the inspirational voices and exuberant music of Sarawan from Iran; the witty tongue-in-cheek humor of Old Spice Boys with one of the best ever cover version of Prince's "Kiss" ever heard; the earthy bluegrass melodies of Foghorn Stringband from rural America; the lively yet sublime tones of Chulalongkorn University Ensemble from Thailand; and the colorful dance, percussionists and masks of Yelemba D'Abidjan from Ivory Coast.

The festival ticks not only because of this diverse cultural presentation of music and dance, it is the people who came, saw, danced and held hands that made the difference. As local boy Hajid from Kuching proudly beams, "Every year people from around the world come to this one place, my hometown to party. It is just so happening." The sense of global community is further asserted by friends Sonia and Jenn from Kuala Lumpur, West Malaysia with Sonia testifying "I love the fact that everyone is here to have a good time. It's just so awesome. Anyone can do anything they want." Jenn backs her pal up, "Awesome. I'm really impressed by this festival. The response from the crowd to the music is just so incredible. It's overwhelming." Fellow KLite Monica Khoo agrees, "I love the people, the music, the atmosphere, and the oomph of it all."

The sense of a global community goes to Europe, where first timer Celina from France found her way to the festival via the internet. "I got to learn of this festival through a French travel website. Now I just can't stop dancing!" Adding to this cultural bridging, the attractive lass enthused "My favorite group is Sarawan from Pakistan. They are so spiritual. I like them so much." Brothers-in-law Dean and Oliver from the U.K. couldn't agree more about being here. "Bang on! This has the right vibe that gets you up and going," says Dean while Oliver tongue firmly in cheek laughs, "I haven't been to Glastonbury 'cos I'm a loser. So I'm here to make up for it."

The icon of rock festival Glastonbury this isn't yet the Rainforest World Music Festival has the same carnival vibe any big scale bash could offer...and more. Till from Germany affirms as he compares it to festivals he has been to back home, "In Europe, it's grey and cold and rainy. The weather here is so much nicer. I can wear shorts and be so totally comfortable." His friend Rebecca from Singapore notes, "It really opens up your eyes with all these different cultures and great music to experience. I definitely will be back here next year." Adding to that Till notes, "Yes, it's the unique atmosphere, the people and the fun that comes with it. It's unlike anything else I've seen before."


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Local teensters Alena, Emma and Karen from nearby Kuching are veterans of the festival having attended every one since it's inception in 1998. According to Alena, what draws them here every summer are "the people who turns up at the festival are all so friendly."

For the youngest of the trio Emma, "it's the music that's very unique and totally cool."

"Every year there is something new that I've never heard before and experiencing it live makes it special. This year for me my favorite is the Italian gypsy music group of Acquaragia Drom," says Karen. Agreeing, Alena added "We love it because it has all different kinds of music instead of the usual rock bands."

From teenagers to real veterans, age means nothing when it comes to having fun as husband and wife Frank and Vanessa from New Zealand attest. "Although it's very hot here, we are loving every minute of it," says a benign faced Vanessa. Her equally benevolent looking other half, Frank added, "A friend of ours told us about it and we couldn't agree more with his recommendation. We will be back next year." Another pair from the southern hemisphere are teenagers, Emma and Clare from Perth, Australia who hopes to be back next year, as Clare sheepishly admits, "Because I didn't pay for it!"

This year's edition hit another record attendance of 20,000 attracting citizens from all corners of the world. Even if it is just only for one weekend every year, the sight of a massive global community celebrating the common universal language of music is awe-inspiring and unforgettable. This is the tingle that draws people back to Sarawak annually on a pilgrimage of not just revelry but beyond. Clare's friend Emma most poignantly sums up her weekend, "In all sincerity, it actually make me believe world peace isn't all that impossible."

Twenty thousand people would vouch for that.

-- Joe Ng

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