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Festival Review: WOMAD 2016

28-31 July 2016

by [Steven Johnson](#) | first published: 5 Aug 2016 in [live](#)

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Baaba Maal @ WOMAD 2016 (Photo: Adam Gasson)

With artists this year hailing from Kurdistan to Kinshasa, South Korea to Santiago, Accra to Australia and Bogota to Belarus WOMAD’s geographical reach shows no sign of contracting. It describes itself as the place to go “to listen to the best music you’ve never heard before”. This will remain true as long as the festival exists but it’s also much more than that, not least illustrated in the growing list of established names that populate the line up each year. Alongside the array of musical delights this weekend there are numerous opportunities to take part in artist-led dance and music workshops, various spoken word events, art installations, a chance to watch artists cook indigenous dishes and a selection of activities for children which surpass those offered elsewhere.

Early arrivers on the Thursday are treated to performances by **Asian Dub Foundation** and Algerian desert rock band **Imarhan** but the music gets underway properly on Friday with the appearance of **La Mambanegra**, a hedonistic nine piece Colombian brass outfit. Their swaggeringly in-your-face performance proves them to be an archetypal WOMAD act, gaining reaction in the only way that matters this weekend – widespread dancing. Later in the afternoon Moroccan singer **Hindi Zahra**’s blues-tinted set may sound slightly over-polished to begin with but grows in stature, revealing a more smouldering guitar sound as it goes on. Meanwhile over in the arboretum Brazilian songstress **Dom La Nena** plays a

latest popular



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selection of innocent cello/ukulele-supported songs that breeze along gently, having seemingly been transported in directly from the most shaded and blissfully becalmed areas of the Brazilian coastline. It’s an irresistibly charming performance.

Heading back into the main arena we catch the closing moments of **Murray Lachlan Young** at the Hip Yak Poetry Shack. He performs one poem named The Scrotum and another piece about dogging, just as a children’s singing procession rolls by. It demonstrates in one swift moment the diversity and broadening appeal of WOMAD and proves the extent to which, truly, anything goes at this festival. Back on musical ground Sahrawi singer **Aziza Brahim** mixes songs from her last two albums into her melodic set. It is as soul-stirring and sunshine-infused as it is slow-moving and illustrates her growing reputation as both a performer and important political voice.

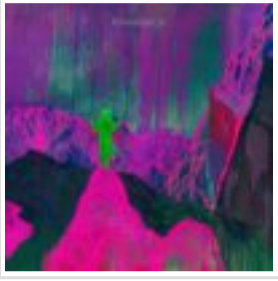


Back at the Ecotricity stage **This Is The Kit** move things in a different direction, winning new fans and consolidating their own status as one of the leading new English folk acts with an accomplished, confident set. Songs like Silver John, Cold And Got Colder and Misunderstanding have a direct emotional impact, the clarity of Kate Stables’ voice cutting through the minimally textured backing from the band. Earlier she plays a stripped back version of All In Cahoots alone backstage for Radio WOMAD (another successful dimension to the festival).

Baaba Maal plays a hard-hitting, muscular set that, while still emitting moments of musical sunshine, somewhat goes against the atmospheric reflection and unashamed idealism of current album The Traveller. It is left to the seemingly all-conquering **John Grant** to bring the first full day to a close on the main stage. On paper he may not seem like a natural WOMAD headliner but the variety contained within his own music soon confirm otherwise, the bold lyrical sweep of tracks like Geraldine, GMF and Grey Ticks, Black Pressure sitting alongside the squelchy funk of Snug Slacks and flashing electronics of Pale Green Ghosts. He may be playing to a crowd less familiar with his music (certainly compared to, say, his recent performance at Field Day) but it’s still an imperious showing. There’s still time to catch **Desert Slide**, Indian musician Vishwa Mohan Bhatt’s latest project, treat the crowd at the Siam Stage to a suitably mesmerising if grounding late night performance of Indian classical music.



Wild Beasts – Boy King



Dinosaur Jr – Give A Glimpse Of What Yer Not



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John Grant @ WOMAD 2016 (Photo: Adam Gasson)

Sidestepper, another Colombian band get the music underway on Saturday. They are a notch less boisterous than their counterparts who opened on Friday, relying more on organic warmth and acoustic percussion to power their set. They still bring an element of the Colombian carnival but in a more composed, nuanced and relaxed way. Over at the Taste The World stage meanwhile **Zmei3** cook up a polenta-based dish while showcasing sounds from their appropriately named latest album Rough Romanian Soul.

Anoushka Shankar draws one of the biggest crowds of weekend eager to hear tracks from Land Of Gold, her bold current album inspired by the ongoing European refugee crisis. She plays with a band that includes Manu Delago on hang and percussion and Sanjeev Shankar on shehnai (an Indian reed instrument) yet it is her superlative sitar playing which shines brightest, lending the politicised tracks a real power. Given the nature of the material it is a serious, subdued set in places but she ends on an optimistic note, the glistening arpeggios of Dissolving Boundaries delivering one of the most beautiful moments of the weekend. She is followed by **King Creosote**, Kenny Anderson playing songs from his forthcoming album Astronaut Meets Appleman with the help of an expanded band.



Sidestepper @ WOMAD 2016 (Photo: Adam Gasson)

However authoritative and impressive the bigger names are it is difficult to get away from the real pleasure and satisfaction of WOMAD being found in the new discoveries made over the weekend. Polish folk band **Muzykanci** provide this in two hits – firstly by leading a workshop that sees members of the audience (including this writer) take part in a weirdly

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enjoyable, if slightly pagan-feeling communal dance in the World Rhythms tent before their full band performance channels raw energy into a force that forges strong connections through music.

Earlier, Chilean singer/rapper **Ana Tijoux** represents a discovery of a different nature, her energetic set making nods to soul and jazz. When she raps it is sharp, slick and punchy and like many others over the course of the weekend she also acts as a musical ambassador for her country. Later, **Kel Assouf**, a guitar band that simultaneously demonstrate the richness and complexity of modern life (having roots in all of Belgium, Niger, Tunisia and France) play a headline set that is broadcast live on BBC Radio 3. They more than capably fill the Toureg shaped-slot in the festival line up, possessing arguably a greater directness and youthful energy than some of their more established forbearers like **Tinariwen** and **Tamikrest**.

Noreum Machi, a South Korean five piece percussion ensemble are first up on Sunday. Their versatile mix of rhythms, drones and even something approaching beatboxing is a good example of how WOMAD is still capable of presenting out of the ordinary offerings. Cape Verdean singer **Lura** brings us back to more familiar territory with her sunny, feelgood take on Portuguese fado music, ensuring everyone watching leaves the tent with a smile on their face.



Imarhan @ WOMAD 2016 (Photo: Adam Gasson)

In a weekend packed with African bands **Konono No. 1** stand tall with their high energy, intensive congotronics. Their music combines distinctive thumb pianos, whistles and drums to relentlessly joyful effect. Later, on the main stage **Pat Thomas & Kwashibu Area Band** treat the crowd to a much broader Ghanaian highlife sound with bigger melodies that touches upon Afrobeat, reggae and big band. As the festival draws to a close, UK based outfit **Afriquoi**'s melding of styles and focus on instilling a party vibe transform the arboretum into one big dancefloor, contrasting markedly to the relatively staid set offered by **St Germain** on the main stage. It is one of those occasions where you wonder whether switching the bands might have actually been a more successful move. However, it is surely not the last time we will see Afriquoi appear at WOMAD.

Italian pianist **Federico Albanese** ends the festival with a stunning performance that confirms latest album The Blue Hour to be one of the standout albums of 2016. Scheduling him right at the end of the festival is a brave move by the organisers, but one that works extremely well. Seeing him alone on stage with piano after the colourful procession of music that has gone before him is a moving, transcending experience, the simplicity and poignant beauty of his set prompting quiet reflection. It puts the seal on a WOMAD weekend to remember, a vivid and wide-ranging celebration of music, culture, people, openness and positivity. There's still nothing else quite like it.

More on **Baaba Maal**


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[Baaba Maal – African Soul Revolutionary](#)

[Interview: Baaba Maal](#)

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