

LADYFEST FAR FROM THE MALE-DOMINATED GLASTONBURY LINE-UP, **BEL JACOBS** DISCOVERS A FEMINIST FESTIVAL WITH ATTITUDE

Let's hear it for the girls

Ladyfest playlist

- 1) Audience members at Ladyfest Newcastle
- 2) The Actionettes
- 3) Das Wanderlust
- 4) Manic Cough
- 5) Peggy Sue And The Pirates
- 6) The Priscillas
- 7) The Monday Club

'Our most diverse yet,' said Glastonbury organiser Emily Eavis, when the festival's official line-up was revealed last week. Diverse, certainly: James Blunt and Kings Of Leon will be rocking, controversially, next to Jay-Z – but if the list demonstrated anything it was how male-dominated the music industry remains.

One movement is offering an alternative and its latest incarnation starts tomorrow. Ladyfest is a global music and arts festival, run for women by women. The first took place in Washington in 2000, organised by, among others, riot grrrl band Sleater-Kinney and singer-songwriter Cat Power. There were performance artists, visual artists, debates and workshops covering subjects from fat oppression and car mechanics to drum basics and – still quirky after all these years – making your own menstruation products. Almost 2,000 attended. Since then, more than 100 Ladyfests have popped up around the world, from Amsterdam in 2002 to Guelph, Canada, in 2005.

Local key element

Writer Red Chidgey was co-organiser of Ladyfest Brighton 2005. 'Ladyfests are unique events,' she says. 'Some are small-scale gatherings; others, with international bands and commercial venues, pretty much rival other local-based music and arts festivals. It's the fact that Ladyfests are specifically feminist that gives them their flavour.'

There is no overarching Ladyfest HQ; each festival is community-based, volunteer-run and not-for-profit. The local element is key: 'Anyone can take up the mantle,' says London's Natalie Blue. 'And every area has its own political focus. Because London is such a melting pot, we decided

to focus on issues of migration and asylum.'

Nonetheless, music is at the core. 'At major festivals, female musicians make up a tiny percentage of performers,' says Ladyfest Newcastle 2006 organiser Milly Shaw. 'That's not because there aren't any around or they're not good. It's that they're not taken as seriously. We wanted to draw attention to all the great female musicians we knew existed but never seemed to get coverage.' Workshops allow people to get involved as participants in the festival, instead of being mute audience members at a gig.

Ladyfest regulars talk about the positivity that emanates from the festival. 'Before we organised Cork, we went to Ladyfest Cambridge,' says Briona Ryng. 'What hit me was the atmosphere. It was quite unique: relaxed, friendly, welcome. It's that sense of community Ladyfests foster, because they're created from the ground up by people working towards a common ideal.'

That, despite assumptions, includes men; up to 50 per cent of punters and some performers, depending on each event, are male. 'There's a really important distinction to be made about being organised by women, for women but open to all,' says Chidgey. 'Men are welcome on most organising committees but ladies

remain in charge – which is important, psychologically and socially.' She adds: 'Basically, any man who doesn't act like a dick is welcome at Ladyfest.'

Fight for equality

In a wider context, both sexes have roles to play in the struggle against gender bias. 'If you're talking about specifics such as pay inequality or violence against women, it's crazy not to involve men,' says Shaw. 'We need to work together to create a fairer society for both genders.'

The most common charge against Ladyfest is that feminism is an anachronistic leftover of 1970s activism; in response, Ladyfesters point to the little uneasinesses that plague many women's lives. 'The worst thing is that sometimes people don't even see sexism,' says Shaw. 'We want to help people recognise and challenge misogyny.'

Versatile, powerful and meaningful, Ladyfests are clearly here to stay. Ryng points to the enduring appeal of their DIY community-based ethos, Chidgey to their continued relevance: 'When we no longer need feminism, we will no longer need Ladyfests. In the meantime, we have a hell of a lot of "dudefests" to put up with.'

Ladyfest London takes place May 9 to 11. For information and tickets, visit www.ladyfestlondon.co.uk and www.myspace.com/ladyfestlondon

Edited by **BEL JACOBS** focus@ukmetro.co.uk

Picture: Red Chidgey

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