

AT CRASHFEST, A WELCOME CELEBRATION OF DIVERSITY

By: Jeremy D. Goodwin
February 25, 2018

This year's CRASHfest — a joyously diverse festival of world music at the House of Blues on Saturday — provided a much-needed oasis from the ugliness that seems to move closer to the heart of our national political discourse every day. Even a round of applause for newly naturalized citizens — seemingly a non-partisan, patriotic act — was tinged with defiance against the current rhetoric coming from the White House.

But most of the political protest at this event, produced by WorldMusic/CRASHarts and now in its third year, was merely implied. It came in the form of joy. A party vibe predominated across a three-stage program that included an emphasis on African music of many varieties.

Mokoomba may have provided the energetic peak, with a propulsive sound that included flavors of Congolese soukous and South African township jive plus folk styles from its native Zimbabwe. Near the end of its set, a bass line delivered by keytar led into a jam on Michael Jackson's "Thriller." Earlier, Mireya Ramos, playing violin for the all-female New York City mariachi group Flor De Toloache, quoted John Coltrane's "Afro Blue" for a few choruses, in another reminder of fluidity among musical traditions.

Upstairs in the crowded Foundation Room, Tal National generated a West African-drenched variant of rock 'n' roll, toggling between mesmerizing grooves and fist-pumping peaks that one could easily imagine recurring across the multi-hour sets the group is known for back home in Niger. Newpoli, another female-led group on a bill dominated by male artists, played a blend of acoustic Mediterranean sounds, with doses of Italian and Greek flavors predominating.

Innov Gnawa was the only group I heard that was not notable for its stylistic fusion. Instead, the ensemble burrowed deep into its signature form of sacred trance music. Typically five members played syncopated qraqeb while Hassan Ben Jaafar anchored the rhythm on sintir, with all trading call-and-response vocals. It created an invigoratingly meditative groove built to offer a path to an ecstatic state.

Locally spawned brass-pop ensemble Rubblebucket was not an obvious choice as headliner, though its bouncy, funky set reminded of the influences the group has culled from some of the styles heard onstage earlier. Rubblebucket strums a warm vibration that always fills me with happy energy. Frontwoman Kal Traver exuded positivity, and whenever she picked up her baritone sax to join the horn section of Alex Toth (trumpet, vocals) and Adam Dotson (trombone), the group powered forward at full clip.

Through its manifest excellence and the affirmative bonds of the temporary community it fostered, the music at CRASHfest gracefully put the lie to so much toxic drivel that has seeped into American political discourse. I was continually reminded of a favorite Phil Ochs quote, which feels ever-more relevant on occasions like this:

"Ah, but in such an ugly time/ the true protest is beauty."

Source: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/music/2018/02/25/crashfest-welcome-celebration-diversity/8XIVbhVTZpbNiM1PkNGBgK/story.html>