That Pumpin' Stuff

The Success of Rock Festivals in the Low Countries

Do you remember the festival
We took those drugs I never thought
I'd get into that pumpin' stuff
A thousand eyes won't recognise us
'Cause I know you and you know me
That's all you need and all I think of
I know this ain't nothing very deep but it's good fun
So don't run into the crowd

dEUS, 'Memory of a Festival' (CD: *In a Bar, Under the Sea,* Island Records, 1996)

'*Festival tickets selling like hot cakes*' a Flemish newspaper reported in a headline at the start of the festival season in June 2009. Exactly one year later, just as the 2010 run of summer festivals was about to burst into life, the reporting in a competing newspaper was even more positive: '*Festival tickets selling faster than ever*'. Even after the summer of 2010, when the last plastic cup had been plucked from the grass and the smell of hamburgers had disappeared, the picture was a very positive one: Rock Werchter (queen of Low Countries festivals and a top player on the international stage) in the village of the same name: 320,000 visitors, sold out; Pukkelpop near Hasselt: just under 200,000 visitors, sold out; Tomorrowland in Boom: 100,000 visitors, sold out. And these are only three of the most successful festivals. Overall, in 2010, Flanders' festivals attracted 68,000 more visitors than in 2009. The trend in the Netherlands was the same: Lowlands in Biddinghuizen, for example, with 55,000 festival-goers, could also put up the 'sold out' notice. Want some more figures? Between 1999 and 2004, the number of festival days in Flanders increased by 500%, with a grand total of three hundred festivals. In the Netherlands you can even choose from two cultural festivals every day of the year, which has already tempted opinion-makers to use terms such as 'festival factory' and 'festivalisation'.

The quality of pop festivals in the Low Countries has also attracted international attention. In recent years, for example, Rock Werchter has been named 'Best Festival in the World' four times at the International Live Music Conference, and it also walked away with three trophies at the European Festival

Pukkelpop Festival, Hasselt.

Awards 2010. In the latter awards, the Netherlands and Flanders were successful across the board: the Cactus Festival (Bruges) and Pinkpop (Landgraaf) were also among the winners.

By now the figures are probably making your head spin, and you'll have got the picture, so we will try to pinpoint the cause of this continuing success. Why is it that visitor numbers continue to increase, even in the past two years when economic growth has slowed? One would expect, at such a time, that people would prefer to spend their money on more necessary things. But after the summer of 2009, the organisers were unanimous in their conclusion: people don't economise on festivals. So what makes the Low Countries such fertile ground for festivals, bringing about an annual pilgrimage of hundreds of thousands of 'pop pilgrims'?

'Cause I know you and you know me'

Festivals have been held in the Low Countries for some time. In fact, Flanders and the Netherlands lost no time in organising their own musical happenings. As far back as 1967 – two years before Woodstock, the international 'big bang' that heralded the beginning of rock festival culture – the Jazz Bilzen festival in the otherwise peaceful village of Haspengouw also began to feature rock groups on its posters. Events that paved the way in the Netherlands were the

Lowlands Festival, Biddinghuizen.

now defunct Holland Pop Festival – which in 1970 attracted 100,000 visitors to an area of woodland near Rotterdam and was a free state for three days – and Pinkpop, launched in the same year and now the longest-running annual festival in the world.

Not that Pinkpop 1970 bore much resemblance to Pinkpop 2010. The Pinkpop hippies of 1970 would be staggered at the expensive tickets, the rigid access control and the flawless organisation. During the past four decades, Flemish and Dutch festivals have been able to develop more and more and have consequently become more and more streamlined. Interviews given by organisers when festivals reach a milestone edition are full of heroic accounts of the chaotic early days, but the conclusion is almost always: 'It was fun, but accidents could have happened. It's a good thing everything is more professional these days.'

Professionalisation through years of practical experience, then. But the geography of the Low Countries has also forced the festivals to stand out from the rest: 'In a small country nothing is straightforward. That encourages you to be just that little bit more creative and organise everything just that little bit more efficiently so that you don't disappear from the festival map', explains Herman Schueremans, organiser of Rock Werchter. A colleague of his, Patrick Keersebilck of the Cactus Festival in Bruges, also praises the typical Belgian approach: 'We plan and organise our festivals down to the last detail. The artists and the public appreciate that.' A Dutch journalist made a similar comment about the events in his own country: 'Other countries can't believe their eyes when they see our summer festivals, and people are really keen to come to them (...) The programme runs perfectly. The site is set up, and taken down again afterwards in no time at all – the public are happy, and so are the artists. We do a professional job.'

According to Herman Schueremans, that professional job has a stimulating effect: 'It's like the story of the street with a good shoe shop. The shoe shop attracts other shops, and eventually you have a flourishing shopping street.' This appealing comment, from a man who is never short of a mercantile quote, straightaway explains the whole patchwork of festivals that exists in these

Pinkpop Festival, Landgraaf.

parts. Because in Flanders certainly, and also in the Netherlands, you see posters advertising local festivals displayed everywhere, even in the smallest villages. Most of them are initiatives by local associations, usually youth groups. One of those events could easily develop into the next Pinkpop or Rock Werchter: two mega-enterprises that both began as one of the many small, local festivals put on with the help of the Scouts or the local football club. That development can happen very quickly, as we can see from Crammerock (Stekene) and Feest in het Park (Oudenaarde), two Flemish summer festivals which, in the last two or three years, have suddenly moved up several ranks in the festival hierarchy. In the past they could have been dismissed as a garden fête that has got out of hand, but now they can flaunt big names and visitor figures in the tens of thousands.

Even Rock Werchter, a giant among festivals, still works together with a good many local organisations. If you park your car or put up your tent during the festival, it is very likely that you will pay the charge to a youngster who is working to raise money for their club. Pukkelpop is still organised by the *Humanistische Jongeren Leopoldsburg*, a humanist association for young people that launched a small-scale alternative festival twenty-five years ago because it was dissatisfied with what was on offer at the time.

Besides the historical link – rock festival audiences now span four generations – roots in the local community are also important. A festival, however large, is organised by people we (might) know, people like us, and that has an appeal. 'Cause I know you and you know me / That's all you need and all I think of', as the Belgian rock band dEUS sings in 'Memory of a Festival'.

Familiarity attracts, then, partly because it provides some common ground in the vast, anonymous mass of festival-goers. Although the size of the crowd is off-putting, it is at the same time an attraction: festivals are the quintessential social event, a moment of shared exhilaration.

Some people are slightly negative about this: one female journalist described festivals as 'secular church services for the zapping hedonist' and a blogger referred to mass gatherings as 'a ritual bordering on self-destruction'. Yet the fact remains: man is a social animal, and whereas in the past people would

Lowlands Festival, Biddinghuizen.

seek each other's company at fairs or football matches, today they do so at festivals, with music and friends. They meet like-minded people with whom they can share emotions. Incidentally, at Pukkelpop 2010 there was a genuine fair. The wheel has come full circle.

In the same way that many advertisers play on our emotions, festivals too make the most of the idea of shared emotions. Pukkelpop organiser Chokri Mahassine always responds with the same one-liner when asked why people keep coming to his festival: *'De wei, dat zijn wij.'* ('The field – that's *us*') Eric van Eerdenburg, the organiser of Lowlands, Pukkelpop's Dutch counterpart and an event that is famous for its unique atmosphere of togetherness, shares this view: 'The Lowlands feeling is about being with other people who have the same interests as you.'

dEUS sing 'A thousand eyes won't recognise us' in the song *'Memory of a Festival'*. Knowing that a thousand eyes are watching you may seem an uncomfortable idea, but festivals have different laws. Those eyes don't recognise us or judge us, precisely because they belong to people who are just like us, experiencing the same 'high' during the festival. For a little while the crowd is more important than the individual. The dEUS song quoted above was inspired by an old David Bowie single, *'Memory of a Free Festival'*, a beautiful musical interpretation by the British singer of the collective festival feeling and 'that

pumpin' stuff' that dEUS sing about: 'Touch, we touched the very soul / Of holding each and every lie / We claimed the very source of joy ran through / It didn't, but it seemed that way / I kissed a lot of people that day.'

The role of the media is also conspicuous: in summer, radio stations suspend their normal schedules to make way for extensive festival coverage, and newspapers carry special supplements. The websites of both radio stations and newspapers publish photos and film clips depicting every aspect of festival life and focusing on visitors' experiences. This enormous exposure fuels the 'have to be there' feeling – after all, if the festivals are attracting so much media attention, they must be important. It is not surprising that young people in particular go along with this, receptive as they are to what life has to offer. For young people, therefore, festivals have almost become a modern rite of passage, a step on the road to adulthood; a couple more carefree summers with music and friends before they enter on working life. 'That's all you need and all I think of / I know this ain't nothing very deep but it's good fun', to quote dEUS again.

'Don't run into the crowd'

So long as there are young people, new visitors will continue to come to festivals. So the organisers don't need to worry about customer loyalty just yet. Festivals in Flanders and the Netherlands evidently have a 'strong brand image', but a few storm clouds are gathering above the otherwise sunny festival landscape of the Low Countries. We are not talking about the crisis (which, incidentally, has not impacted heavily on the festival sector, although a number of sponsors – mainly banks and small businesses – have withdrawn their support), but about the ever-tighter government rules and regulations that could so easily throw a spanner in the works.

In recent years the festivals have already invested heavily in health and safety measures in order to comply with statutory norms. No-one would dispute the need for this – although the organisers must have had to take a deep breath when the bills landed on the doormat – and since the tragic accident at the Danish Roskilde Festival (where nine people were crushed to death in 2000) nobody is taking risks, and rightly so. More alarming are the increasing complaints about the excessive controls on volunteer and holiday work undertaken by youth associations and students. 'If you force people to meet all sorts of requirements (...), you'll destroy part of the social fabric', remarks Pukkelpop organiser Chokri Mahassine. He may be over-dramatising the situation, but 'regulatitis' is certainly a problem. The more regulations you have to comply with, the less time there is for other – often more fundamental – tasks.

Even if you can put the above into perspective – after all, entrepreneurs always complain about too many rules and regulations – the investment necessary to comply with environmental standards is even more substantial. Festivals are finding themselves caught between a rock and a hard place: on

Rock Werchter.

the one hand they are under pressure from the public and the government to reduce their ecological footprint, but on the other as commercial enterprises they obviously want to continue growing. Organisers encounter all manner of obstacles, especially when growth involves expanding the festival site. In many cases, not only is there simply no room to do so, but local residents also protest about the pressure a festival puts on the surrounding area in terms of traffic chaos, excessive noise and tons of rubbish. The last thing the organisers want is to get on the wrong side of the neighbours – they are too important as a bastion of local support.

In addition, if a festival is to grow, the quality of the music must remain high – i.e. the programme should include the best bands. In the radically altered music landscape of the 21st century, that is anything but easy. Now that record sales have collapsed, bands have to go on the road to earn money. But what might appear to be a golden opportunity for festivals could well become a serious disadvantage because with more and more festivals emerging in Eastern Europe, the United States and Canada the competition for bands is becoming ever more intense and they can demand astronomical sums. Combine these costs with the limited opportunities for growth mentioned in the previous paragraph, and you begin to understand why festival organisers are worried. Incidentally, there are more and more grumbles about quality. Anyone reading the unprecedentedly critical comments by journalists, especially the ones about the latest edition of Rock Werchter (which included phrases such as 'identity problem', 'poorest programme ever' and 'few highlights'), can conclude that our rock events, or at any rate the largest of them, are approaching their 'best before' date.

Resilience

Our festival landscape has become quite crowded, in the last ten years particularly, and we should perhaps expect one or two of them to fall by the wayside. Nevertheless, it would be a shame to 'thin out' the festival landscape too much, now that the Low Countries have something to be proud of again. The governments of the Netherlands and Flanders – often regarded as meddlesome busybodies in this context – nevertheless recognise the uniqueness and importance of this festival culture: quite a few events have been receiving subsidies for many years. Moreover, there are two recent policy initiatives: since 2009, the PMV (*Participatiemaatschappij Vlaanderen*), an independent Flemish investment company, has provided loans through its investment fund CultuurInvest to the organisers of small and medium-sized festivals. There is a similar initiative in the Netherlands: the Dutch Pop Music Plan 2009-2010, whereby organisers are entitled to apply for a subsidy if they book bands from the Netherlands.We shall have to wait and see, however, whether these resources will remain available in the coming period of austerity.

But whatever happens, in the past Low Countries rock festivals have proved themselves so impressively resilient that Flemish and Dutch pop pilgrims need not worry yet: their 'sacred' fields and parks will still be here to welcome and allure them with 'that pumpin' stuff' for a good few summers to come. And anyway, there is always the music to turn to for comfort. ■

Translated by Yvette Mead