

# Happy Days Are Here Again: The return of the Newport Folk Festival

After a year off for something obscure called COVID, the Newport Folk Festival returned to Fort Adams to rage again. The festival started inauspiciously Friday, as I could see lightning flashing in the horizon driving in. There was a shelter-in-place warning in effect when I arrived, which is odd when there is no place to shelter. The first act I caught was **The Marcus King Band**, which thundered out of the speakers like a burst of '60s soul with some old school blues chops thrown into the storm. King is a white guy in a cowboy hat who pulls off covering **Percy Sledge's** "When a Man Loves a Woman." On his own original, "Wildflowers & Wine," King channels **Otis Redding**. On "Goodbye Carolina," King and the band add some roots Americana blues into the mix.

Other highlights from Friday were **Margo Price** with the **Resistance Revival Chorus**, which had a powerful **Carly Simon** by campfire stripped-down vibe on the main stage. I then caught **Maggie Rose** at the Busking Tent singing a soulful number, "Saint," from her upcoming album. Rose and her band got down with a funky ditty called "Do It." After Rose finished, it was announced that the festival was called for the day because of ominous approaching clouds with 40 mph winds and hail. The storm never actually hit the Fort, but better safe than sorry. I still couldn't help wondering if this year's festival, like last, was doomed.

Saturday started with **Grace Potter** being the hero for agreeing to kick off the festival at the un-rock 'n' roll hour of 11am after her set got cancelled by the phantom storm of the day before. She has her own freaking festival in Burlington, Vermont, but she wanted to rock in Newport, so that is what she and her band did. Margo Price would be all over the place at this year's festival. On Saturday, she performed a set with **Jeremy Ivey** as a duo doing each other's tunes. I was struck by how much Ivey is influenced by **Tom Petty**. Certainly not a bad thing, one would have to be a pencil-necked geek not to like Tom Petty. Petty's influence reverberates in Ivey's tunes, especially "Diamonds Back to Coal" and "All Kinds of Blue." Price closed out the set solo with a topical ballad, "American Made," which was just beautiful.

The highlight of Saturday, in a day of highlights, was without question **Randy Newman**. Newman performed solo on piano, occasionally accompanied by a crying child at the side of the stage and a foghorn from the bay that seemed to annoy him more and more as the set went on. Newman did most of his hits from the opening "It's a Jungle Out There," through "You Got a Friend in Me" and "Short People" — pretty much everything but "I Love LA." My favorite was the audience participation number "I'm Dead (But I Don't Know It)" which just amped up Newman's ongoing hysterical stage banter.

**Jason Isabell** and **Amanda Shires** closed out the day as a stripped-down three-piece. It was good, but I missed the power of Isabell's backing band, **The 400 Unit**. I do love Isabell's lyrics. "Heaven is wasted on the dead" was one that stood out. They closed out the day with a lovely rendition of "If We Were Vampires."

I heard plenty of people around the festival talking about the **Caamp**, so I checked them out Sunday. My first impression was they came off as a midwest version of **Mumford & Sons** — remarkable for how unremarkable they were. I warmed up a little by the third song, but in general, it wasn't my thing. **Billy**

**Strings**, on the other hand, was a badass mix of eccentric bluegrass and folk. I don't even like bluegrass all that much, but Strings was electric and seemed to be a consensus fav for the day in the crosstalk throughout the festival. Even **Governor McKee** was rocking out to Strings' set on the Quad stage.

It was a good thing **Nathaniel Rateliff** booked two sets after that elusive storm cancelled his set Friday. His set Sunday was a stripped-down version instead of the usual high energy R&B of his work with the **Night Sweats** that I personally love. Rateliff did eventually do a surprise set with The Night Sweats on Monday, but of course, that was my day off from the festival. Rateliff brought up **Tommy Prine** and the ever-present (and wonderful) Margo Price for a **John Prine** tribute to close his set.

**Allison Russell** closed out Sunday with set chock full of guests galore, R&B, jazz, poetry and really a little of everything. One moment Russell is playing trumpet, the next she is doing a gospel style duet of "Help" by the **Beatles** with (of course) Margo Price. Russell also brought up **Yola**, **Brandi Carlile** and oh, **Chaka (freaking) Khan** to close out the day with renditions of "Ain't Nobody" and "I'm Every Woman."

Tuesday was another stacked day with killer sets early from **Vagabon**, **Melissa Chapman** and **Langhorne Slim**. **Bleachers** did a stripped-down set of their quirky brand of pop. **Fred Armison** had a hilarious set of music-centered comedy using guitars and drums. **Sharon Van Etten** performed solo on the main stage. I dug her new song, "Darkness Fades." My favorite Scientologist, **Beck**, was hysterical with his banter and performed both solo and accompanied by guitarist **Smokey Hormel**, **Jack Antonoff (Bleachers)** and Armison on drums. Beck dipped deep into his songbook to do renditions of "Asshole," "One Foot in the Grave" and "Debra" as well as covers of "I Am the Cosmos" (**Chris Bell**) and "Raspberry Beret" (**Prince**).

**Black Pumas** absolutely tore it up as the surprise guest on the main stage with a crazy set of psychedelic soul Wednesday. They just oozed joy and energy. **Lake Street Dive** continued the vibes, performing standouts like "Hypotheticals," "Hush Money" and "Know That I Know" from their latest album, *Obviously*.

Then it was time for Rhode Island's own **Deer Tick** to close out the festival, and what a glorious ending it was to six day of transcendental music. I've seen Deer Tick over 50 times, and this set easily ranks in the top 5. They covered **ZZ Top's** "Cheap Sunglasses" in honor of the recently passed **Dusty Hill**. They did standards like "Baltimore Blues," "Ashamed" and "Hope is Big." They brought **Vanessa Carlton** up to duet with husband, **John McCauley**, on "In Our Time." They dug deep into their archives to pull out "Cake and Eggs," an unreleased song from the *Divine Providence* album. They also did a new song called "If She Could Only See Me Now" from their new live album, *Live From Fort Adams*, recorded last year in an empty Fort Adams. The contrast between this year and last couldn't be greater for Deer Tick. The joy of 2021 made the bleakness and fear of 2020 seem like a nightmare that one half remembers as the final refrain of "Goodnight Irene" drifted over the bay.

R.I.P. Dusty Hill

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