

Rites of Spring Festival 2008

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ROSfest 2008 - The "Rites of String" Festival

By Mike Flavin The 2008 edition of the Rites of Spring Festival (ROSfest) saw a major upgrade in the venue, moving from the Colonial Theater in Phoenixville, PA to the much larger Keswick Theater in Glenside. The change was a wise move, as the larger staging area allowed the switchover between bands to proceed without a hitch (at least none that could see, as every group started on time) and the acoustics of the venue allowed each band's sound to be heard well from every seat in the house (not every band took advantage of the optimum conditions – more on that later). Lighting was also vastly improved, without even taking into account the unfortunate events of last year's set by Starcastle. The only issue I have with the new venue is parking. The venue lot is quite small, and public lots don't seem to be very plentiful around Glenside. Perhaps next year a few cardboard signs should be tacked up around town directing the Rosfesters to a parking area. Musically, the organizers scored another home run with a tremendously diverse collection of bands. From the polished professionalism of Ambrosia to the road-tested boogie of Wishbone Ash, there was not a dog in the bunch. Fans of guitarists in particular should have been pleased by what they were hearing. There were so many incredible guitarists over the course of the weekend that the show could have been called the Rites of String Fest. Kudos to the organizers for finding more than adequate replacements for Starcastle (by GPS) and The Flower Kings (by Crack the Sky), and more kudos to Crack the Sky for switching their closing time slot so that Wishbone Ash would have ample time to get to the show after arriving from the UK that afternoon. All in all, another terrific weekend put on by George Roldan, Tom Smith, and staff. I do hope enough tickets were sold to make the larger venue cost effective, as it can only enhance the festival's ability to continue to attract top-notch talent year after year. I have to say I didn't do much homework on the groups I would be hearing when I arrived at the Keswick Friday night. I prefer it that way – it makes me want to catch every single moment of every band. A live set is a completely different animal from an album, and I would much rather approach each band's performance on its own merit rather than listening for how well they may or may not have reproduced the sound of their recordings. Having attended the last three ROSfests, some of the best musical memories for me are the times I was totally blown away by a band I had never heard, or even heard of, before. What I didn't expect at this year's show was that it would happen with almost every band on the bill. So let's take a look at the different bands that played this year ...

FRIDAY, MAY 2ND -GPSGPS, featuring former Asia members bassist/vocalist John Payne, guitarist Guthrie Govan, and drummer Jay Schellen was formed after keyboardist Geoff Downes decided to participate in the reunion of the original lineup. Brought into ROSfest after the cancellation of Starcastle, they performed a great set of melodic guitar-driven prog. Ryo Okumoto of Spock's Beard was unable to appear with the band, and replacement Erik Norlander was as fine a choice to fill the keyboard slot as anyone could have asked for. In my opinion, Ryo's embarrassing behavior at last year's ROSfest helped derail a perfectly good Spock's Beard set, so having a class act like Erik onstage was reassurance that we wouldn't have a repeat of infantile butt-paste jokes instead of music (that was the only time I had seen Ryo perform, so I'll assume he isn't doing that on a regular basis). Musically, the band was terrific. Payne is an incredibly powerful singer in addition to being a fine bassist, and Schellen's solid drumming provided a perfect anchor for the group. Schellen also contributed strong backing vocals as well. Guitarist Guthrie Govan was hands down the most accomplished guitarist of the weekend. His solo segment was a clinic in virtuoso guitar playing, featuring everything from jazz standards to lightning fast country picking, not to mention some serious shredding. He is on a par with players like Steve Morse in terms of technical ability, yet also knows when not to play as well. GPS's music is melodic and song-oriented, similar in style to Payne's former band of nearly fifteen years, but with more emphasis on powerful guitar playing (with a guy like Govan in the group, who can blame them?). A fine set by a group of excellent veteran players to kick off ROSfest. AMBROSIA Ambrosia? That Ambrosia, or did a prog band steal the name from the group that recorded pop ballads back in the 80's? Indeed, it was that Ambrosia. At first, the addition of a Grammy-nominated pop group to the ROSfest lineup may have been a bit of a head-scratcher, but those familiar with their album tracks knew that under the glossy pop sheen lurked a prog band at heart. And prog they did (yes, prog is a noun AND a verb!). Leaving behind the hits for an evening, one got the impression that the guys were really enjoying the opportunity to flex their considerable musical muscle. Except for a tense few moments when guitarist Doug Jackson's amp decided to give up the ghost, there were plenty of smiles onstage as the band moved effortlessly from vocal oriented songs to complex instrumental arrangements, to what came pretty close to straight jazz improv. One of the most versatile and definitely most vocally gifted group of the weekend, Ambrosia can cover just about any musical style, and do it well. Some of the highlights of their set were a powerful version of "Nice Nice Very Nice", a wild Hendrix sounding synth solo by David Lewis, and of course their funky prog classic "Life Beyond LA". A very impressive performance, made all the more enjoyable by the fact that it was a chance to hear some great musicians set aside commercial concerns for a night and just have fun.

SATURDAY, MAY 3RD - BLIND EGO Blind Ego is a project headed up by RPWL guitarist Kalle Wallner, along with fellow RPWL vocalist/keyboardist Yogi Lang. Rounding out the quintet are vocalist Paul Wrightson, drummer Erwin Reader, and everybody's favorite sideman, bassist John Jowitt. Blind Ego features a harder, more guitar-driven sound than the lush ambience of RPWL and offers plenty of room for Wallner to stretch out. He's an incredibly tasteful guitarist in a style reminiscent of Pink Floyd's David Gilmour, always getting the maximum emotional impact from a simple line or well-placed glissando rather than relying on flashy chops, although he has plenty of those, too. Vocalist Wrightson (ex-Arena) was a dynamic frontman, dressed in black from head to toe as he stalked the stage hitting some pretty impressive high notes. He appeared to be a bit gassed toward the latter half of the set, perhaps exhausted from

wearing what looked like a pretty heavy black jacket under hot stage lights. Bassist John Jowitt is one of the most popular musicians in the ROSfest world, not only for his prodigious talent (who doesn't he play with?) but for his outgoing personality. He's always fun to watch and great to listen to, and this set was no exception. He's the rare sideman who manages to inject his personality into every performance without upstaging the person whose name is on the marquee. Although the band's stage presence seemed to lack just a little of the cohesiveness that comes from performing regularly, they were musically solid and their Saturday morning performance set a pretty high standard for the rest of the day. Set List:

Obsession

Mirror

Disturbed (new song by Blind Ego, unreleased)

Sugar for the Ape (by RPWL)

Black Despair

Don't Ask Me Why

Break You

Moorland

Crack in the Ice (by Arena)

Moon and Sun

Forbidden to Remain

Perfect Strangers (by Deep Purple) RITUAL One of the most wildly unique and interesting bands of the weekend, Ritual performed the most diverse set of music I've heard at any of the three ROSfests I've attended. With a musical approach that combines elements of Gentle Giant, early Genesis, King Crimson, and even Led Zep's thump, this band was truly something to witness. Rocking as hard as any band of the weekend, they also brought remarkable intricacy & subtlety to their set. Dressed in a skirt and at times resembling the bizarre love-child of Ted Nugent and Sebastian Bach, lead vocalist owned the stage with his larger than life stage presence and amazing guitar and vocal work. After pinning the audience to the backs of the seats with their opening numbers, they brought out a number of Swedish folk instruments for a compelling acoustic set. The interplay between instruments reminded me at times of the acoustic numbers featured on the early Genesis albums. Sitting in the back of the theater, the wonderfully arranged string & percussion highlighted just how good the Keswick can sound in the hands of a skilled audio crew. By the time they returned to the electric instruments for the final third of their set, the audience was truly in their hands. They could do no wrong at this point, and entertained the crowd with some sing-along bits before bringing down the house with a thunderous finale. A stunning set! RPWL Unfortunately, technical difficulties (otherwise known as TRAFFIC!) kept me from seeing the first half of this excellent band's set. Drawing on their Floydian influences, their presentation was moody & somewhat mysterious, with the lush keyboards dominating the sound (not surprising, with two excellent players in Markus Jehle and vocalist Yogi Lang). One of the things I enjoy in RPWL's music is their knack for generating dynamics by the use of subtle changes in their arrangements, like a keyboard or guitar melody line that turns a minor key progression into an unexpected major chord.

Guitarist Kalle Wallner is a master at weaving those kinds of changes into his solos, and was excellent once again in his second Rosfest appearance of the day. Vocalist Lang, sounding a bit like Ray Wilson, delivered an understated yet masterful performance, never getting in the way of the melody. If not for the excellent ROSfest lighting, one could just close one's eyes and let RPWL take you on a journey from mystery to imagination.

Set List:

-Silenced

-Breathe in, Breathe out

-Masters of War

-Stranger

-Choose what you want to look at

-This is not a Prog Song

-Start the Fire

-Gentle Art of Swimming

-Three lights

-Sleep

-Wasted Land

-Roses

-Hole in the Sky

CIRCA

Drawing on the rich musical history of Yes for inspiration and from the band's convoluted family tree for personnel, Circa was the bona fide supergroup of ROSfest. Formed by producer/songwriter Billy Sherwood and featuring long time Yes members Tony Kaye and Alan White along with session guitarist Jimmy Haun (the band was also joined by Billy's brother Michael Sherwood on keyboards), expectations were certainly high as they took the stage for their Saturday night headlining appearance.

Fans of Yes at their most bombastic had plenty to enjoy, as Kaye & White were in top form while Sherwood did an

amazing job of channeling the thunderous bass of Chris Squire. Haun, a fine musician in his own right, was unfortunately hard to hear over a mix that was muddy and generally too loud for the room (matters of taste aside, they were easily the loudest group of the weekend).

In addition to the material from their debut album, Circa also performed an extended (at least twenty minutes, but seemed twice that) medley of Yes tunes that covered almost all of that group's 40 year history. For me, this was the least enjoyable part of the set, as the medley consisted of only small snippets of songs. It began to remind me of teenage musicians at Guitar Center testing out Marshall stacks by playing only the opening riffs to every song under the sun. I would have much preferred to hear a few well placed whole songs from the catalog, especially after being teased with a number of obscurities from Keys to Ascension, Drama, & 90125. Chatting with friends after the set, opinions seemed to be split 50-50 regarding the medley. Although frustrating for me, it was still an amazing display of skill to pull off a medley that long and with that many changes.

Musically, Circa were very impressive, however the muddy mix and almost total lack of interaction with the audience hampered the enjoyment of what could have been a great set.

GOLD PATRON V.I.P JAM PARTY

One of the ways ROSfest supports itself is through the Patron, or Gold ticket program. In exchange for the cost of a Gold ticket, Patrons have the benefit of an advance sale, being able to choose where they are seated and admission to the Saturday night post-show V.I.P party. This was my first year attending, although I have certainly heard stories about the festivities. None of which I am allowed to comment on, you'll just have to buy a Gold ticket and see for yourself.

What I can report is that it is a casual fun event that offers a chance to have a few drinks and conversation, or photo ops with some of our musical heroes. There is also a set of band gear ready for any of the musicians in attendance to put together a jam session. It's a delightfully disorganized affair (the jam session, not the party), with classics such as "Free" and "All Right Now" and the ever popular "Generic Funk Blues in E" performed by some world class musicians — although not always on their primary instrument. Keyboardist Tom Brislin of Spiraling acquitted himself nicely on the drums, whereas the previous performer (who shall remain nameless) might want to stick with the guitar. The aforementioned blues number featured keys by Tom Brislin & Erik Norlander, bass by Fredrik Lindqvist of Ritual, guitars by Alan Benjamin of Advent and (I think) Mark Westwood of NEO. I don't recall the drummer at the time.

Later on, Guthrie Govan joined the jamming with John Jowitt on bass and once again put on a clinic of superb guitar playing. The man makes it look so easy; he is truly an amazing talent.

I believe the Saturday night V.I.P party has a lot to do with the expectations placed on the Sunday morning bands — the two events work together. How much partying can ROSfest attendees do and still make it to the morning show, and how well can the band jump start some of the folks who may have been up a wee bit late?

All in all, the VIP party was a great time. I got to meet some performers that I've admired for years, and socialize with other prog fans from all around the world. And yes, I still made it to the Sunday morning show.

SUNDAY, MAY 4TH -

CREDO

The Sunday morning ROSfest set has become something of an event within an event, having provided some incredible wakeup sets by bands such as Magic Pie and Darwin's Radio in previous years. Would Credo, a quintet from the UK with only two albums ten years apart be the latest?

The answer is a resounding yes!

I'm not sure if Credo plays venues as large as the Keswick regularly, but if they were at all overwhelmed by the ROSfest experience, it was impossible to tell. Singer Mark Colton hit the stage like he owned it and wasn't going to let go of it until he was damn good & ready. Bounding from one side of the stage to the other, leaning right over the edge, and then pausing between songs to tell the stories behind the songs, he was both an intimidating physical presence and the everyday bloke you might have a pint with at the local pub. His humorous R-rated between song stories, which ranged from explaining the background of "Skin Trade" to announcing that he was pleased to be standing on the same stage as "talentless tw*t" Boy George, went a long way toward winning over the audience.

The entire band put in a great performance. Credo's arrangements provide excellent accompaniment for Mark's lyrics of relationships gone wrong to be heard clearly and guitarist Tim Birrell in particular had one of the finest guitar sounds of the "Rites of String", thanks to his PRS guitar and Mesa-Boogie amp. Think Santana gone prog, and you'll have an idea. His calm demeanor and controlled playing were a perfect compliment to

Mark's kinetic energy.

In the words of a commenter on the Rosfest newsgroup: "Credo continues the tradition of Sunday morning bands kicking ass;. I can't say it any better than that.

Set List:

The Game
Turn The Gun
Skin Trade
Seems Like Yesterday
Too Late to Say Goodbye
Untitled - New song about drug abuse.
The Letter
From the Cradle to the Grave

BLACK BONZO

There's an old saying that youth is often wasted on the young. Not so with this terrific group from Sweden. Black Bonzo was one of the biggest hits of ROSfest, with their dynamic stage presence and powerful back to basics Deep Purple/Uria Heep groove. Dammit, some of these guys looked like they were just out of high school, but even the most jaded old proggers in the audience couldn't help but get caught up in the excitement.

In keeping with the "Rites of String" theme, Joakim Karlsson was yet another excellent guitarist, keeping the band's (bare) feet firmly planted in what's commonly known as Rock and Roll. Due to the unfortunate theft of Nicklas Åhlund's keyboards at a previous gig, he was playing without any synthesizers or MIDI gear, tearing through the set on "only" a Hammond Organ. Not the norm for many keyboard players in the 21st century, but he handled the instrument and situation admirably. Add a super tight rhythm section of drummer Mike Israel and bassist Anthon Johansson to the mix, along with energetic frontman Magnus Lindgren, and you have the makings of a truly memorable and fun performance.

Black Bonzo has tremendous potential not only in prog, but in the music world in general. Great musicianship and style, strong visual appeal (judging from the length of the meet & greet line, it doesn't hurt to be a good looking bunch of guys); there's no limit to where this band can go.

Set List:

Thorns Upon A Crown
Leave Your Burdens
New Day
Ageless Door
These Are Days Of Sorrow
The Well
Fantasyworld
Iscaiot
Lady Of The Light

Jailbait

Where The River Meets The Sea

CRACK THE SKY

Having been raised in the northeast United States and hearing about Crack The Sky's amazing gigs since the late 70's, the announcement that they had been booked to replace The Flower Kings as headliners got me more excited than ever about ROSfest. Finally I was going to see for myself what the buzz was about back then. I was not disappointed, to say the least.

Drawing on their nearly 35 year history, CTS rocked the Keswick with a performance that was musically tight, yet had a looseness and funkiness that brought to mind a sort of Rolling Stones of prog. Guitarists Rick Witkowski and Bobby Hird contributed mightily to the "Rites of String" with some great soloing and an extended guitar dual, and the rhythm section of original bassist Joe Macre and drummer Joey "sticks" D'Amico drove the band like a Ferrari on the autobahn.

Although his voice was rather rough in spots, John Palumbo fronted the band with a combination of "been there, done that" swagger ("We were prog in…1980? So we're just gonna play") and genuine appreciation for the positive reception they were receiving. He also took audience interaction to a new level for ROSfest

by actually climbing offstage to join them in cheering on the band, and later in the set spent some time walking up & down the aisle, grinning from ear to ear while audience members strummed his guitar. It was great fun to see a little bit of rock concert mayhem sneak its way into the normally conservative ROSfest. The final number of the set had the audience pressed up against the stage, providing the "woooos" to the Beatles' "I am the Walrus".

Although Crack The Sky never achieved the fame that should have come their way after Rolling Stone named them one of the best new bands back in 1975, their performances were legendary. This terrific performance can only add to that reputation.

WISHBONE ASH

Rounding out ROSfest was a band with a history dating back to the late sixties/early seventies, Wishbone Ash. Playing the closing Sunday night set (Crack The Sky graciously switched places to give them time to travel from the airport), they were another fine contribution to the "Rites of Spring". Featuring the twin guitar attack of bandleader Andy Powell and Muddy Manninen, they may have seemed like another odd choice for a progressive rock festival (no keyboards??), but in this context, in this time slot on this particular night, they were perfect.

Solid and professional as one would expect from a band with almost 40 years on the road, they were also lively and exuberant, fueled by the crack rhythm section of drummer Joe Crabtree (of Pendragon & many others) and bassist Bob Skeat. Powell in particular was having a grand time, coaxing both terrific wah-wah solos and acoustic tones from his custom Flying V, while Manninen defined tasteful bluesy cool with his singing Les Paul tone. Dual and dueling guitars are a trademark of the Wishbone Ash sound and whether soloing together or separately, they drove the band through a set that spanned their entire history, from their first album to the most recent release *The Power of Eternity*. Powell took a few opportunities throughout the set to give some of the back story behind a few of the songs, and also to tell a few stories picked up over the course of a lifetime spent gigging.

Wishbone Ash didn't approach the raucous frenzy of Crack The Sky's set, and thankfully, they didn't even try. It's not their style. Instead, they invited the audience to roll the windows down, take the roof off the convertible, and enjoy the breeze as we join them for another journey down the highway.

Reviewing a show like ROSfest is something that can go in either of two directions. Like the show itself, the potential is there for it to be a nightmare of technical problems, rude people, or lousy music, or it can be a happy dream of a show running like clockwork, supportive fans, and some of the best music anyone could imagine. I'm happy to say that ROSfest 2008 was the latter. It was a joy to attend such a well-organized and musically amazing weekend, and great fun to try to put it all into words and capture some of the excitement in pictures.

The only criticism I have (more like a suggestion) is the complete lack of any female performers in the lineup. Given that women are at least 50% of the population, it seems unlikely that there weren't any female musicians that would have been worthy additions to the roster. Prog shows have a tendency to become testosterone-fests, and it would be nice to have everyone represented.

Overall though, anyone who enjoys progressive music — indeed, anyone who enjoys music at all — would be well served not only to attend the Rites of Spring, but bring some friends and turn them on to this great music and wonderful event.