

Festival report: a hard rain fell

REVIEW

NEWPORT FOLK FESTIVAL

Sat., Aug. 2, & Sun., Aug. 3

Fort Adams State Park

BY MATT KEEFER

Music is magical. Last weekend's Newport Folk Festival was, in some ways, a crossroads of magic, a stomping ground for musicians as established as Kate Taylor and Brian Wilson, to lesser known acts such as Red Rooster and the Honors. The festival is a place where you can find the silver-haired Young@Heart Chorus performing the Flaming Lips' "All We Have is Now," where Jim James of My Morning Jacket can climb the stage and join She & Him, and where you can bump into singer/songwriter Willy Mason still strolling around catching the sights.

Saturday brought another visitor to the festival. Whether a swift low-pressure system or the ghosts of old, the sky opened during Trey Anastasio's solo acoustic act. Little in nature is known to turn away a Phish-fan, though the blinding rain certainly drove away the more timid.

Those who left missed the real festival. The music fans braving the elements to catch a glimpse of Zooey Deschanel's American Bandstand-inspired dress, festival-goers seeking refuge under the merchandise tent and stray Del's Lemonade umbrellas, a group of barefoot girls performing a rain-dance to a vendor's insistent drums.



Him and her. M. Ward and Zooey Deschanel perform Saturday on the Harbor Stage at Fort Adams. The rains eventually led Deschanel to don a stylish polka-dotted raincoat. PHOTO BY JOE RUGGERI

The Felice Brothers, who, despite a powered-down stage and sore voices, managed to perform a truly acoustic "This Land is Your Land" to a crowd reception not unlike a spiritual revival.

Rain, like music, is one of those rare things that gets past our defenses. It hits the skin but leaves a faint trace of itself, a cold sensation that absorbs just a bit deeper than expected. The mix of the two is almost natural, torrents careening through the swayed grass, almost envious of the music-laden air.

On Sunday, the pools of rain-

water had drained, leaving matted grass and hard bald spots of rough-tread earth. By the time Levon Helm took the stage, it was dry and sunny and nearly cloudless. But the communal feeling brought about by a festival as old as Newport's, between musicians young and old meeting for the first, or even third or fourth times, the sensation of having shared an umbrella, still lingered. Leave it to an old hand like Helm to find the appropriate response: He invited ukuleleist Jake Shimabukuro, Little Sammy Davis' harmonica, and singer Gillian Welsh's duo to his stage

to perform "The Weight." Originally written by Helm's '60s rock group The Band, the festival's highlight performance evoked the same old ghosts and ecstatic singing from the crowd.

The old fort will still have those footfalls kneaded into its grounds. It may have the slight ring of music in its rocks. And, if you ask the right person, it'll have another ghost of memory waiting to open the clouds for another festival day.

Matt Keefers still likes to put on a record and look out the window when it rains.