

Words and Deeds

THRESHOLD FESTIVAL 2017

Various Venues, the Baltic Triangle

31st March – 2nd April 2017

The theme of this year's Threshold Festival is Darkness and Light: an exploration of the many contrasts within and around us. It takes a variety of forms – from the arts installations and multifarious musical acts to the locations hosting them, and the emotions running alongside and underneath.

After Friday night's press launch introduces us to the festival directors and their vision for this year's festival, the fun pop of EMERGENCY TIARA and the spoken-word poetry of CIARAN HODGERS (sample line: "My city whispered across the Manx sea"), it's outside for a fact- and post-truth-fact-filled trip around the Baltic Triangle, led by improvisation theatre company IMPROPRIETY. Their international audience gasp at such facts as: Grafton Street is where graphs were invented! Who knew? The tour ends in Northern Lights, a new venue, hosting Threshold art installations and performances.

Saturday afternoon and it's back to Unit 51 to check out the Soul Inspired Events stage. We start with FAMILY RANKS, a Manchester-based collective with powerful lyrics and a reggae-infused beat enhanced this afternoon by intricate hand-clapping. They're clearly enjoying themselves as they deliver rhythmic tracks like the soulful Better.

Next up is Londoner CHINCHILLA. Kaya and Chris first heard her a week before the festival and knew she had to play here. This confident young woman is poetry in pink during her first number telling us "my name's Chinchilla", then she shrugs off her pink coat and gets down to some urban pop/RnB musings on relationships and life, such as in Crazy Boy, when you think you know someone but actually... She throws in a couple of covers – Beyoncé's Drunken Love is stunning – and then introduces Stuck In The City, which showcases her lyrical and vocal range and even draws some participation from the appreciative crowd. Remember her name: Chinchilla is going to be a star.

Back at Unit 51 in the evening, MAMATUNG's eclectic, genre-defying magic wows the sizeable crowd – most of whom appear to be here just to see this band. Tribal beats and eldritch vocals are to the fore on the playful yet spooky What Was The Question?, and throughout the set each member plays a number of instruments, often simultaneously.

OVVLS, recently announced as part of the first wave of acts for LIMF, are headlining this stage and do so to great effect. Pain Is Beauty with its dark, Gothic lyrics ("Pain is what makes you beautiful to me") builds in orchestral majesty, keys and vocals powering it on.

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They make a huge sound for just two band members playing synth and drums – even factoring in the well-utilised samples. It's just a shame that there aren't more people here to hear them.

HEY COLOSSUS – Loner Noise/WRONG stage headliners – suit the industrial setting of District down to the ground. They perform a riff-tastic, tight, highly professional show, contrasting death/sludge metal with something approaching a more melodic rock (although Paul Sykes' heavily distorted vocals remain fairly constant throughout) to an appreciative, head-nodding audience. Gotta love a band that pack the stage with guitars and aren't afraid to use them, to brain-melting effect.

Darkness and light are juxtaposed as we swap the dark metal for the shiny pop going down at Constellations, where the joint is definitely jumping. All the way from New York, EMERGENCY TIARA – classically trained, Japanese-born Juri and her two female backing singers – are playing their first-ever festival. In matching mini-dresses, contrasting patterned tights and colourful wigs, they're reminiscent of a 60s girl group. The lively Downtown Boy displays their exuberant bubble-gum pop perfectly. Kudos to the backing band, who'd only had one afternoon to learn the tracks.

SCIENCE OF THE LAMPS have a hard act to follow, but deliver an energetic, quirky yet soulful performance, starting with new track Invisible, Invincible Women, and including others such as Duckling Hell and 27 Club Reject, showcasing the intelligent, thoughtful song-writing and delicate harmonies the band employ to such good effect.

On Sunday, there's just time to catch DELIAH, the first act on the Merseyside Sound Station stage, with their soulful yet funky, bass-driven RnB. They play a short, melodic set including Marble Heart and Better The Devil, which are a perfect vehicle for Michelle Harris's crystal-clear vocals.

Next, a nip into cute and kitsch Hobo Kiosk turns up the lovely CONNOR MOLLOY, playing a few songs on acoustic guitar. His storytelling and jaunty playing stand out on tracks such as Carry You Home and Henry VIII & Anne Boleyn.

The Mellowtone stage at Black Lodge Brewery is pretty much THE place to be on Sunday afternoon. First up are LIMERANCE, a duo who are new on the scene but packing 'em in – gigs and crowds alike – and it's clear why. Their beautiful, simple Appalachian-tinged songs and the intimate, joyful way in which they deliver them – with gorgeous two-part harmonies and cleverly finger-picked guitar – are a delight. New political number Not In My Name goes down a storm, but so do all their other songs. Definitely ones to watch out for this year.

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TIZ MCNAMARA (guitar & vocals) and his band deliver an intense, deeply emotional set as he attempts to carve meaning out of personal tragedy, light out of darkness. When he sings “Twenty-six years on and nothing’s changed” in new track Days Like These, alone with his acoustic guitar before the band start up, the grief is tangible. “What’s the point in moving if you’re only moving backwards?” he asks in Moving Backwards as the keys swell, echoing the emotion of the heartfelt, affecting lyrics. If there was a dry eye in the room during this set, it wasn’t one of mine.

Next up, BLACK MOUNTAIN LIGHTS bring a shedload of instruments and vocals to the stage and use them to great, multi-layered effect throughout. They start with Submarine, with its simple, understated beginning and lovely harmonies, and continue in a watery vein with Into The Sea. On the soaring Tumbling Sky, Steve Fowlds utilises the melodica to haunting effect, and then murder ballad Tower surprises with a change of style: its intense, tribal beats and menacing vocals suiting its murderous theme. They finish with the majestic, anthemic Two Steps: “And it’s one step forward and two steps back/Sold down the river and I’m never coming back”.

Headliner SEAFOAM GREEN and his band whoop it up from the first number, to the delight of a packed room. Adrian Gautby’s pedal-steel playing on many of the tracks, including Ruby, is outstanding, and Dave O’Grady’s raw vocals add an authentic, whisky-tinged edge to proceedings. More great harmonies are on show as he and Muirreann McDermott Long dovetail beautifully throughout the set. There’s a Delta swamp blues vibe later on as Adrian cuts loose yet again on the pedal steel. The Band-like Down The River brings the short set to an end... but, wait... an encore – in the form of rousing Lowly Lou.

Cocooned in our emotional little cave in BLB, we’ve appreciated the very strong thread joining the acts on this stage – another one of Mellowtone’s beautifully curated line-ups – and it feels extremely disorientating to emerge into the bright daylight.

Evening again, and we’re back in Unit 51, this time for headliners PAUL DUNBAR & THE BLACK WINTER BAND, who open with a rocking blues number and then slow it down for the second. The heavier Make Peace With You follows, setting the scene for them to really rock on down and take the audience with them on Control Yourself. Dunbar gets the audience on their feet and dancing, and then steps to the edge of the stage, playing guitar furiously, and then continues down onto the dancefloor – a consummate showman whose enthusiasm and ability to work an audience are flexed to good effect tonight.

Another interesting, varied Threshold festival is over: lovely weather, new bands to enthuse about and old ones to re-engage with, great food and drink in the Baltic Triangle’s host of eat-and-drink-eries, friends met and made – hope we can do it all again next year.

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