
Hull In Thrilling State Of Flux

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NEIL MUDD reports on a music festival exploring the links between the city and its Nordic neighbours

John Grant's North Atlantic

Flux Festival

Hull, Citywide

5/5

OVER four days and three nights, this festival transformed Hull into Reykjavik-on-Humber.

Subtitled Sounds from Smoky Bay — as much for its maritime as its musical connotations — the festival heralded Roots and Routes, the second season in Hull's year-long odyssey as UK City of Culture.

The former Czars' frontman John Grant, who's made the Icelandic capital his home, used the event to champion an eclectic line-up of British and Nordic artists via the prisms of contemporary experimental music and avant-garde electronica.

The venues chosen, including the baroque-style City Hall and the stillfunctioning Jubilee Church with its intimate Queens Hall space out back, proved every bit as idiosyncratic as Grant's choices of acts.

The festival's opener set the tone, pitting the crowd-pleasing beats of a reinvigorated GusGus against introspective folk-electronica from Susanne Sundfor.

There was a label showcase for Reykjavik's Sweaty Records at yet another off-beat venue — disused wharf building Gate No. 5 — where Actress and Wrangler, Cabaret Voltaire lynchpin

Local field-recording artist Jez Hey French filled the tiny Mortimer Suite with an immersive audio-visual installation which combined gorgeous large-scale projected close-up images with punishing levels of subsonic bass and sound cues that included the noise of a glacier melting.



BBC Radio 3's Late Junction intervention served up a lazily paced smorgasbord, with the infectious deadpan kabuki cabaret of Norwegian percussive trio Pinquins counterpointed by the dark intensity of Iceland's Ragga Gisla, whose guttural yelps and shrieks crystallised mid-air into the most intricate sweetness.

Hastily assembled improvisations fused looping otherworldly harmonies with inspired free-jazz off-kilter weirdness and cut-and-paste beats.

The terrible cost of the bargains struck between fishermen and the sea were highlighted in The Humber Star, poet Adelle Stripe's electrifying collaboration with Halldor Smarason, which revisited her own family history.

She began with epic tone-poem Beyond the Silver Pit, a forceful meditation on wrenching loss and the stoic resilience of working women.

It was lent a quiet dignity by Hull poet Vicky Foster, whose vocal performance toggled between honeyed intimacy and brittle radiophonic crackle.

Later, Eyvind Gulbrandsen's devised performance for musicians from the Royal Northern College of Music shimmered with spectral grace and Jobina Tinnemans and Jacob Tekeila's work, tempered by mesmeric harmonies, reverberated with shock-and-awe bombast.

When Grant did take to the stage on the closing night, he did so as the People of Hull's adopted Homecoming Queen. Ravishing pared-down readings of standards (Marz, Fireflies, It Doesn't Matter to Him) rubbed up against newer material (Grey Tickles Black Pressure).

The singer can fashion an aching beautiful song seemingly at will.

But less expected is his hilarious, expletive-fuelled stage persona: "Are there any of you who grew up here thinking 'I hate this fucking shitty town?'" he inquired mischievously as he introduced I Hate This Town, his poison-pen letter to Buchanan, Michigan. The Hull audience lapped it up.

Grant performed for 90 minutes, then begged off to "go shake my booty" at the after-party. "Come join me," he told the audience. It summed up the weekend and the city.

In Hull 2017, we can all join in.

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