

Newport Folk Festival – another year, another smashing success with world class acts like Norah Jones, Elvis Costello, Violent Femmes, and great local talent

“Raise your arms! Feel your blood pulsing through your hands... This is FREEDOM!!!!” Those were the words of Patti Smith at this year’s Newport Folk Festival, followed by the cheers of fans roaring and shouting, “You’re amazing!,” and “Patti, we love you!!!”

It’s no surprise fans were thrilled to see the 69-year-old rocker, still killing it on stage just as she did in the prime of her career in the 70s. Patti Smith is a rocker down to her core. She’s a product of her generation and still today, a truly incredible singer. Smith sang old favorites, and even surprised the audience with a few new ones – like a tribute song commemorating the exact five-year anniversary of the death of Amy Winehouse.

“What a blessing it is to have such great singers here today, and how sad it is to have lost Amy. This little song, we wrote for her...” The song was good – simple and sweet – but it paled in comparison to the rest of her set. She opened with a cover of Bob Dylan’s Boots of Spanish Leather. Then, she honored Prince by singing When Doves Cry, followed by hits of her own like Dancing Barefoot, and then closing and engaging the crowd to sing Pete Seeger’s If I had a Hammer.



*The American Folk-Rock Duo, The Oh Hellos.
(Photo: Josh Souza)*

But perhaps what stood out most was Smith's preaching to revolution. Playing up today's political state, Smith called out to the crowd, "These are the words of Allen Ginsberg!," reciting a footnote to Ginsberg's poem *Howl*. "Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy, the world is holy!!!! Holy mercy! Charity! Faith!" After this, she sang *People Have the Power*, dedicating the number to Ted Cruz.

The entire three-day festival was defined by its incredible music and its near perfect weather – aside from hitting an almost unbearable 90 degrees on Saturday. Festival-goers stood knee deep in the water surrounding Fort Adams, taking breaks to cool off between sets, while others watched the entire festival from boats and floating rafts out on the water. They were either staying cool too, or scoring the only access they could get – the festival sold out to 10,000 people every single day.

The weather didn't seem deter anyone however. Fans weathered the hot and sticky weekend, hanging around the expansive, oceanfront grounds of Fort Adams – picnics set, chairs laid out, spots on the lawns reserved to come and go from food and craft vendors to revolving performances. Visitors of all ages, from all over the East Coast and beyond (like Hawaii) dressed in Birkenstocks and plaid, straw hats and bandanas, with dust-covered ankles and grass-plastered backs. (There was also a mustache trend – perhaps Rayland Baxter-inspired.)

Four total stages offered nonstop music every minute of the festival, which occurred from roughly 11:00am to 7:00pm every day. Fans seemed glued to their phones, constantly checking the schedule to determine which stage, where to go, and who to watch next. If anything, “too many performers” is the only downside of the festival. It’s certainly not a bad problem to have. In addition to nightly headliners Patti Smith, Flight of the Conchords, and Alabama Shakes, the festival offered offered musical talents from the past and present, and those likely to hit it big in the near future.

Norah Jones took to the stage, as well as Ryan Adams, Graham Nash, Father John Misty, Middle Brother, Nathaniel Rateliff and The Night Sweats, and dozens of others. At one point, even songwriting legend Kris Kristofferson showed up for a surprise appearance. The 80-year-old thrilled the crowd performing more than a dozen country music classics – including Me and Bobby McGee alongside up-and-coming star, Margo Price.



The eclectic sounds of “Raury” mixes soul, hip hop and folk. (Photo: Josh Souza)

At the exact same time, on different stages, were breakthrough artists like Ruby Amanfu who recently performed with Beyonce, or 20-year-old solo artist Julien Baker who performed at the iconic festival for the first time. New artists received instant recognition for their talent, and gained immediate followers and fans.

Elvis Costello also joined the weekend lineup, performing mid-afternoon on Saturday and drawing the crowds, dancing, to their feet. Throughout his set, he invited other festival performers like Middle Brother and Preservation Hall Jazz Band to perform along with him – as if the two young, guitar playing, rockin' chicks with him weren't already awesome enough.

When people weren't dancing, they were taking photos and videos of the icon, and screaming out song requests. Costello even played the politics card too at one point adding, "It's a season of campaign songs, I think we all can agree... and oh, I'm running for President by the way" ... and the crowd went wild.

The festival closed on Sunday with an outstanding set by Alabama Shakes – an awesome blend of folk, blues, and a whole lot of funk. Lead vocalist Brittany Howard was a vision as the sun went down and the air grew cool.

With her plum-colored glasses, a long blue, brown, and white floral dress, and her mint green Gibson guitar, she was the very picture of folk, music, love, and good vibes. "Thank you for coming back all you beautiful people," she said, referring to the band having been there just four years before. Leading the band, Howard captivated all with her loud rockin' bravado and her alternating soft soul, bringing the long weekend to a beautiful and heartfelt close.

If anything stood out it was this – community, togetherness, peace, and love. Despite three jam-packed days of music and

partying, everyone just had fun. The scene was busy but calm. The people were happy. People cheered, friends gathered, and musicians and fans alike mingled in the crowds. It wasn't uncommon to see artists walking on the outskirts of the festival grounds or taking interviews from local media sources and photos with bloggers.



*Grammy-winning
American blues rock
band, Alabama Shakes.
(Photo: Josh Souza)*

At an afterparty at the Newport Blues Cafe, bands that had performed during the festival were suddenly now performing right there in the small sold-out party of just 400 people. Artists walked right through the crowds of those who simply had been lucky enough to purchase tickets in time. Deer Tick, as usual, came on as Deer Tick and Friends – surprising the audience with their unannounced special guests – like Ruby Amanfu and Matthew Vasquez of Middle Brother. Vasquez ripped off his shirt and crowd-surfed, though this only followed Rayland Baxter who had already himself joined the crowd. Nearing the end of his amazing set, Baxter pointed to his sax and organ player and said to fans, “I want y’all to pay attention to this side of the stage for a minute.” He then put down his guitar, turned off his mic, hopped off the stage, swigged a beer, and just started jamming alongside fans in the crowd.

This is freedom. This is folk. Music, as Patti Smith cheered,

“is the greatest f*ing weapon of my generation,” and for a moment, music seemed to make the world slow down. Life, stress, worry all seemed to come to a stop this weekend. And instead, the only way to feel or act was to love, and to jive, and to just feel the music, breathe the air, and unite together as many and as one.

Holy, holy, the world holy. “Holy is Newport!,” Smith improvised. “Holy the groaning saxophone... Holy the jazzbands... Everybody’s holy!” There must be something true in there, something awe-inspiring and spiritual, music and sound worthy of worship, veneration – the festival has been a hit since it started in 1959.

And until next year, the lyrics of the festival’s closing song will loom. Just moments before the crowds stirred up their own self-led closing chants, dancing, high fives, and train lines, Alabama Shakes fittingly covered Bob Seger’s Night Moves. “I awoke last night to the sound of thunder, How far off I sat and wondered, Started humming a song from 1962, Ain’t it funny how the night moves, When you just don’t seem to have as much to lose, Strange how the night moves with autumn closing in...”

All photographs by Josh Souza.

Newport Folk Festival Day One

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Newport Folk Festival Day Two

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Newport Folk Festival Day Three

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