

MARFA MYTHS: A FESTIVAL IN THE DESERT WHERE YOU WATCH ONE ACT AT A TIME

Defiantly eccentric, this high-end music and arts beano revels in the offbeat and enriching

By Una Mullally — March 16, 2017



“Marfa is not a late-night town, but like all festivals, serendipity provides off-road opportunities.”

Travelling to Texas in March for a music festival generally means one thing: the full-on gig binging of SXSW, where musicians compete among the chaos, crowds and “content” for recognition and buzz. But eight hours’ drive west of Austin, or three hours east of El Paso, in a small town called Marfa, the antithesis to South By Southwest unfolds.

Now in its fourth year, Marfa Myths is a music and arts festival run by Brooklyn label Mexican Summer and the local arts organisation and gallery Ballroom Marfa. In the 1970s, the minimalist artist Donald Judd came here looking for isolation, beauty and affordability. He bought up some buildings, including old military hangars, and inspired an unlikely marriage of design and context; a town in southwest Texas in thrall to minimalism.

The site-specific nature of the event brings to

mind Inis Oírr’s Drop Everything, and the attention to detail, and curatorial flow means that nothing needs to be missed because nothing clashes. Here music and art is savoured, not crammed. There is no festival indigestion, just enjoyment and reflection. A mixture of art openings, gigs, talks, screenings and general wandering creates a festival experience that is enriching and remarkably sophisticated.

Artistic context

Certain lines of programming give a broader context to a booked artist. Roky Erickson of garage-psychedelic legends 13th Floor Elevators played the opening night. There was also an exhibition of the band’s posters at the Lumberyard Gallery and a talk by band biographer Paul Drummond.

A Saturday afternoon gig at the Saint George Hall featured Julia Holter followed by saxophone legend Pharoah Sanders. A break of a

few hours in the programme preceded a concert at the swanky Capri bar/restaurant, where Perfume Genius and Weyes Blood presented a captivating electronic music collaboration.

On Sunday afternoon, Connan Mockasin's performance was billed as the premiere of his sitcom at the Crowley Theater, before the bizarre trailer ended abruptly and Mockasin and his band appeared behind the screen, beginning a concert with studio-crisp sound. The poet Eileen Myles presented a Dirty Gay Movie Night at the same theatre. Swedish band Zomes played at Wrong Marfa, a small white room.

At El Cosmico, a twinkling campsite and Airstream trailer park, the all-female DJ collective Chulita Vinyl Club played a Friday night set. The opening of an exhibition called Strange Attractor at Ballroom Marfa featured a previously unshown Alexander Calder noise mobile.

This is high-end stuff. And that's before we even get to the mescal, served straight with wedges of blood orange.

Hip-hop near a petrol station
Marfa is not a late-night town, but like all festivals, serendipity provides off-road opportunities.

On Saturday night, the drummer from the excellent garage-rock band No Nombres played the Lost Horse bar, and mentions a hip-hop night happening opposite a petrol station 10 minutes walk up the street. A small storage building was transformed into what feels like half-house party, half-Chief Keef video, with local MCs and a brilliantly rowdy crowd. The next morning, a sound meditation session cleared the cobwebs in the most calming way possible.

Outside of the festival programming, there is more art to see around the town, including, phenomenally, Andy Warhol's gigantic The Last Supper hanging in one gallery. At the Chinati Foundation, Donald Judd's 1km-long concrete installation and works in aluminium are breathtaking.

There are galleries everywhere in the town, and much more to look at besides: the gorgeous signage; the clean lines of the town's architecture; the beautifully minimal bar at the Hotel Saint George; the Hotel Paisano, where the film Giant was filmed; the handmade boots at Cobra Rock; the gorgeous clothes at Mano, a store run by a Levi's concept designer who left San Francisco for Marfa. Half an hour drive outside the town is Prada Marfa, an incredible installation of a Prada store in the desert.

This is a festival about place, and the scenery is stunning; desert mountains and open road, shooting stars and jackrabbits, tumbleweed and prickly pear cacti. For those jaded with the homogenisation of the festival experience, Marfa Myths sits well alongside Drop Everything, Airwaves and Lake of Stars.