

# MARFA MYTHS: A QUIXOTIC MUSIC FESTIVAL THAT DEFIES THE AGE OF INSTAGRAM

By Jael Goldfine – May 23, 2019



Marfa is a speck of a town in the lonely high desert of West Texas, pierced by a few yellow licks of highway, washed in a buzzing silence and surrounded by endless horizon. It's been the subject of fascination since minimalist sculptor Donald Judd moved there in the 1970s, leaving it littered with sculptures, his home, a prestigious contemporary art museum (The Chinati Foundation) and the lore that the land itself is imbued with creativity. Whispers about the town's mystical status technically pre-date Judd, going back to 1800's gossip about a still inexplicable glow above the Chinati mountains known as the Marfa Lights.

But the more recent quirk in Marfa's history is what transformed the former railroad water stop into a precariously burgeoning tourist economy and art

mecca. The kind of place where Danish artists build anti-capitalist art installations on the side of the highway, that Beyoncé documents herself visiting on road trips and her sister Solange selects (alongside the Guggenheim) to stage performance art. The kind of place where HBO shows documenting parodied literary communities are set, actual famous poets live, and where Brooklyn record labels host music festivals.

Marfa Myths, a collaboration between Brooklyn indie label Mexican Summer and local arts non-profit Ballroom Marfa, is an annual music pilgrimage that has become a keyhole into Marfa's bucolic, peculiar universe. Capped at 800 people, absurdly intimate, tranquil and hyper-local — in contrast to the sched-

ule of paint-by-numbers, 10,000-100,000 person affairs assembled out of 18-wheelers onto nameless patches of land and packed away after three days — Myths is one of several events the terms “anti-Coachella” or “anti-festival” have been applied to.

Myths is, indeed, completely unrecognizable within the modern definition of a music festival. Not a single stage, bed, toilet or taco is imported. The art installations are permanent. Not one ‘pop-up experience’ appears over the weekend, unless you count the lady selling ceramics off a folding table outside the sporting goods store. Attendees sleep in the town’s few hotels, or El Cosmico, a colorful, self-described “Bohemian West Texas Nomadic Hotel” and campground of (as I’m told) bumper-sticker fame across the state. All shows are hosted in local bars and



venues, ensuring that each day, visitors have to trek up and down Marfa’s single dusty intersection to catch the generously spaced out events. In between, they’ll get to know the town’s geography intimately, visiting Judd’s sculptures at the Chinati Foundation, patronizing the few restaurants, including a world-class burrito shack plastered with photos of grinning celebrities, the single coffee shop, and the scattered boutiques (whose succulents and geometric jewelry would have you believe you were in Bushwick, but for the cowboy boots).

However, something feels wrong about the implication that Myths is a backlash to festival culture. As if a few hipsters scouted the “quirkiest” they could find, so they could sit around smugly listening to noise music and making fun of influencers in assless chaps and people getting herpes on ferris wheels. Arguably, Myths feels just as antithetical to this scene as the coital assless-chapped couple riding a ferris wheel, while Justin Bieber lip-syncs in the background.

Rather than a protest of anything, Myths feels like the organic outcome of a symbiotic relationship between a place and a project — an experience experience that both defies the term “music festival,” and the colorless, curated non-conformity promised by an “anti-Coachella.”

Myths feels like sitting on pebbles under the notoriously huge, cerulean Texan sky, inside the white adobe walls of Ballroom Marfa’s courtyard, lulled into an unshakable calm by the joyful rhythms of Jess Sah Bi & Peter One, two Ivory Coast musicians blending traditional folk, Afro-pop and American country. And wiggling around to London DJ Josey Rebelle’s disco-tinged techno in El Cosmico’s backyard.

It feels like laughing out loud, after wandering into Lost Horse saloon to catch Superstar & Star, the bizarre cult duo of Trinidadian-born Neville Lawrence and his collaborator, an older woman simply known



as Ann, whose Caribbean-soul performances resemble a low-budget but huge-hearted Elvis impersonation. And swaying to the psychedelic country of Texan hometown hero Jess Williamson, under low lights in the Marfa Visitors Center, one of the “main stages,” where concerts have the homey ambience of a school dance.

Whether your friends are punks or basics, none of those moments will attract many “omg jealous” replies or explosions of heart-eyed emojis on an Instagram story. But they were among the most memorable at this year’s festival, which has become something of a musical social experiment. “Our goal is total discovery. We want to challenge people who come here,” explains Keith Abrahamsson, co-founder of Mexican Summer, and co-curator of Myths. This year’s uncluttered, 20+ act bill highlighted a cocktail of young polymaths (Rebelle, jazz experimenter Jon Bap, sonic collagists Makaya McCraven and Emily Sprague), post-modern weirdos (Superstar & Star,



The Space Lady, a self-taught Boston street player whose zonked-out synth music has found cult fandom, the half-satire, half-synth-pop project of Jerry Paper) and unsung “elder statespeople” (old school Houston hip-hop DJ OG Ron C, feminist punk Vivien Goldman and electronic pioneer Annette Peacock). Plus, a couple of indie staples to “ground the program” like Khruangbin, Tim Hecker, Cass McCombs and Deerhunter.

This last category has shrunk each year. Fans’ curiosity about Marfa is plenty for them to make the trek out from New York City, Chicago, Portland and all of California and Texas’ metropolises (the closest of which, El Paso, is a three-hour drive away) with hardly any even indie-famous headliners. “We’d love to get it to a point where people say, ‘Oh, I don’t know anybody on this line-up, I think it’ll be amazing,’” Abrahamsson says. He adds that big-name acts are welcome, on the condition that they “do something really freaky, completely out of their comfort zone, super weird. Like, John Mayer can come play, but he’s gotta do a Dead Moon set.” Their experiment has produced a sweet spot in the alt-festival circuit: friendlier than the avant-garde assault of Basilica Soundscape, but weirder than the weighty line-ups of Arcosanti FORM or Pitchfork Fest. “As each year grew in ticket sales and attendance, we realized, ‘Hey man, people are really stoked to come out there and see something that they are not going to see anywhere else.’”

Myths’ quixotic goal to challenge rather than appeal (and its Bandcamp deep-dive of a bill) runs the risk of appearing pretentious or exclusive. But within a few minutes of the familial, low-tech festival, it’s clear that Myths isn’t concerned with curating an elite audience. Rather, Myths is curated in the spirit of nudging people towards an appreciation of music that’s rooted in an elementary, defamiliarized place of joy, rather than clout. Made possible by its extraordinary hometown, Myths is a musical experi-

ence as agnostic to the religion of cultural currency that we're all unwilling devotees of, as perhaps is possible in 2019.

This quietly rebellious ethic feels consistent with Myths' model as a festival. Acutely conscious of "seeming like outsiders coming in from New York," according to Abrahamsson, Myths doesn't just prioritize, but only exists because of its intimate relationship to Marfa. From its origins in 2014 as a one-day, five-act show (that Abrahamsson describes as a rained-out, glorious "total fucking disaster"), the festival has grown slowly and organically with Marfa, ensuring each addition or expansion serves the town as well as visitors.

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Mexican Summer has made this happen, largely through its marriage with Ballroom Marfa (a pillar of the town's arts infrastructure) which facilitates partnerships with nearly 20 local organizations, from the Chinati and Judd Foundations, to Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid, a law firm that provides free services to migrants and receives a portion of the festival's merch sales. Myths' yearly zine lists every single restaurant and site in town, pushing its influx of travelers outwards instead of confining them to the festival. A local studio-owner fills all of Myths' production needs, as well as providing space for the yearly artist-in-residence program, which yields music (including, so far, collaborative EPs from Dev Hynes and Connan Mockasin; Ariel Pink and Weyes Blood; Deerhunter and Cate Le Bon), as well artifacts that become a part of Marfa. A 2015 mural by Grouper's Liz Harris decorates the wall of the local coffee shop, and paintings by Connan Mockasin hang in the local library.

There's a reason that Myths is so intentional. In recent years, a cocktail of Instagram (specifically, users'

obsession with neon signage and colorful stucco) and the growing list of pop cultural landmarks which intro articles like this one, have drastically raised Marfa's profile. Paradoxically, this growing Instagrammable appeal of Marfa's mysteries is, to some extent, what make Myths' Instagram-defiant musical experiment possible. Those same posts and proper nouns encourage attendance to a festival whose line-up isn't designed to please. The phenomena has thrown Marfa into limbo.

The weekend of this year's Myths, the town is on-edge. "#MARFASAYSNO" yard signs dot the town, following a confrontation with music festival company C3 Presents (a subsidiary of Live Nation), responsible for mega-fests like Austin City Limits and the seven Lollapaloozas around the world. Three weeks earlier, C3 officially postponed a proposal to found a 5,000 person festival outside Marfa, starting in 2020. The number is a fraction of ACL and Lolla's 400,000-plus events, but more than twice the population of the tiny town, which sometimes runs out of gas and staples.

When residents discovered the proposal earlier in the year, it ignited an existential crisis fueled by visions of a FYRE Fest-meets-Burning Man nightmare. The panic went beyond the endless questions of sanitation, traffic, noise pollution, fire safety, permanent impacts on the fragile desert ecology and annual expansions in size. C3 promised to answer these questions, according to Texas Monthly, on top of offering the town 10% of the profits to build infrastructure and affordable housing. However, residents' greatest concern is simply how a large-scale festival could fundamentally transform the culture, sealing Marfa's fate as a wealthy hippie playground.

"It's exploitation," says city councilwoman and local shopkeeper Buck Johnston, bluntly. "It's a corporate entity with no connection to the town wanting to use this site for a festival that the majority of locals — longtime residents and transplants alike — are



opposed to.” She adds, “We are doing great at this point and we need those quiet weekends to regroup and be the small, quiet town we all love and enjoy.”

C3 has only delayed its plans. Johnston predicts there’s a “50/50” chance C3 will find a way to move forward, given her understanding that the company still holds a 10 year lease on nearly 250 acres outside town, and sent employees to the town as recently as last week. C3 didn’t respond to multiple inquiries about its plans.

Most admit, however, that C3 is only a symptom of a greater epidemic in Marfa’s tourism, which Johnston sums up: “People want to trade on the Marfa ‘mystique’ while engaging in practices that actively erode the magical things we have here: our robust and supportive community, delivering Marfa up as a product and putting real, lasting wear-and-tear on the town, its social fabric, its delicately balanced environment — while delivering little benefit to the town or its residents.”

Events already fill almost every weekend of Marfa’s calendar, from annual film, jazz and agave festivals, to workshops on everything from landscape painting to managing deer and elk, to the town’s largest affair currently, Trans-Pecos Festival of Music + Love, which hosts around 2,000 people on the grounds of El Cosmico.

Even at the current pH of the town’s tourism, one business owner grumbles about the chaos of Trans-Pecos’ weekend, and describes feeling like “a part of the show” for tourists: playing the role of friendly local with an idiosyncratic life story, that they’ll recount to friends back home. Another suggests the “growing pains of realizing the town is a tourist economy” are particularly painful for Marfans, due to a penchant for “Wild West rugged individualism” and the “idealism” nursed by Marfa’s isolated landscape.

“We’re acutely aware of the danger of the Marfa Brand eclipsing the actual lived reality of the town,” says Johnston. “This is something that many other places with an influx of tourists are struggling with.” She’s perhaps thinking of tourist boomtowns reduced from culturally rich communities to tourist zoos like Tulum, Mexico which has been devastated over the last decade by a mismanaged explosion of festivals, resorts and nightlife development.

Myths, hardly un-Instagrammable, is inextricable from the growth that has made Marfa appealing to an entity like C3. Despite their concerns, all three locals express fondness for Myths and say they’d like to see the festival continue to thrive. Johnston points to Myths’ ethic and approach as an example of the tourism Marfa needs — and which would be compatible with the type of permitting and rental restrictions locals like her hope to push forward, to prevent whatever the next C3 might be.



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“They’ve made it feel like it’s our event too. It isn’t forced down our throats,” she says, pointing to the “laid back” attitude of the festival, the “vibe” of the acts, how Myths integrates with the town’s venues and vendors, and Mexican Summers’ acknowledgment of an attendance cap. “Organizers have been inclusive and sensitive to the community’s unique culture and vulnerabilities.”

It’s dissonant that an experience which feels defined by its success in wresting music away from the economy of cool, has found itself implicated in such a messy crisis of clout. Despite Marfa’s tumult however, people on all sides seem to understand Myths’ future as all but certain, safeguarded by its design, which puts community and art over capital.

*Photos courtesy of Pitch Perfect PR, Alex Marks, and Rowdy Dugan.*

*Link: [Marfa myths: A quixotic music festival that defies the age of instagram](#)*