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AFRIKAFESTIVAL HERTME

Stan Rijven finds out how the Dutch village of Hertme manages to create such a beautiful and intimate setting for some of Africa's best acts

Well-known for its soccer team and local beer, the region of Twente in the eastern Netherlands is also famous for another reason. At least among African musicians and music fans, that is. Because of its adventurous line-up and intimate ambience, the Afrikafestival Hertme offers a dream-come-true experience. After 25 years it is an anomaly in today's festival world, with low entrance fees, a pastoral setting and a relaxed attitude. "We just have one stage. There's no security, no backstage and we run everything with local volunteers," says director Rob Lokin.

Hertme is a tiny village surrounded by lush green woods and flowering fields, and hiding amidst its cafés and church is an open-air

theatre, which staged passion plays for the local Catholic community in the 50s. In a wooden cabin – now used for artist catering during the festival – black and white pictures on the wall tell the story of this religious past, showing Biblical scenes of dressed-up villagers against the background of archaeological ruins. Those times are gone but the ruins remain the backdrop for another passion. In the 80s Hertme's open-air theatre was revived and transformed into a site for African music. Ever since, a mix of traditional groups and electric bands has drawn a daily crowd of 4,000 people over one weekend in summer.

Masked Dogon dancers from Mali, xylophone ensembles from Tanzania and

drummers from Burundi have played next to amplified acts such as Papa Wemba, Bonga, Tinariwen, Ebo Taylor and Mahmoud Ahmed. Several artists, such as Bassekou Kouyaté, made their Dutch debut at the festival.

The whole thing depends on one man: physician Rob Lokin. He was infected by African music while working as a doctor in Cameroon. "In 1977 I attended a concert by Prince Nico Mbarga at a venue in Buea," he explains. "I got hooked and bought myself all kinds of African records."

For a quarter of a century Afrikafestival Hertme has been hidden in the backwoods of the Netherlands, yet it has hosted unbelievable line-ups thanks to Lokin and his wife Emmy. Their love for music and their independent approach (there is no government money involved in the running of the festival) makes it a unique event. Members of local scouting groups and brass bands run the parking and catering facilities. As a doctor by day, impresario by night, Lokin has had the luxury of designing his own festival. "When back in Holland I often went to Amsterdam, Brussels or Paris to check out bands. Music magazines and radio stations also kept me informed." During their holidays, Lokin and his wife visited other festivals: "At Musiques Métisses in France we discovered lots of artists from Cape Verde and Madagascar; at the Festival in the Desert in Mali we met Oumou Sangaré and Tinariwen."

Lokin's eclectic musical tastes perfectly matched the experimental approach needed to hold a festival like this in a rural area. "When we started, most people in Twente were unaware of the current musical developments in Africa," Lokin remembers. "It started in 1989 with percussion groups from West Africa. But programming contemporary African music was more difficult. Musicians had to come from 'the bush' otherwise people didn't like it. They expected drums and *djembés*." Still, Lokin tuned his audience into electric sounds with *ubongo* music from the Tanzanian artist Remmy Ongala, Afro-beat from Sean and Femi Kuti and Ethiopian grooves from Mahmoud Ahmed. Just like his father, Femi Kuti wasn't easy to work with. "His management demanded special safety fencing around the stage, which is a no go for me. In Afrikafestival Hertme the stage and audience are one. I refused and his manager finally accepted. But walking several hundred metres in the rain was too much for Femi. So I had to bring him cars to travel to the stage."

Over the last 25 years, the Lokin family



"In Afrikafestival Hertme the stage and audience are one"



Jupiter & Okwess International at Afrikafestival Hertme in 2012

have offered musicians boarding in their home. "Remmy Ongala and his band stayed at our place. Maybe that is why he delivered such an amazing performance, from 8pm to 1am. Probably also the bottle of whisky, and other stuff, helped him through the night. Afterwards we cooked him a grand meal in our garden." One musician was delighted to catch up on some family history while at his house. "When running through my record collection Baba Sissoko started to point out his uncles and grandfathers on the record sleeves."

Having patients at his doctor's practice in the daytime, Lokin needed patience at night to build his festival. "For years there was no internet, so all communication went by letters, phone and fax. On the weekends we sometimes travelled to Paris just to sign an artist or pay a fee in advance to make sure they would come." Other times, the local organisation committee had to get involved. "Once we had two cars sent to Brussels to fetch a band because of an airstrike."

There are campsites nearby and transport connections to local towns. For the 25th jubilee, Lokin has made special plans. "It is not a totally surprising programme, but a 'best of' edition on purpose. We are welcoming back Bassekou Kouyaté, Bonga, the Drummers of Burundi and Oliver Mtukudzi. Salif Keita, Tony Allen and Richard Bona will perform here for the first time, as they were highly influential in the development of African popular music."

To sum up, he points out that "people don't have to hurry at our festival". In Hertme, it's as informal as it would be in Africa. "There is just one stage so between sets, there's time enough to stroll around and meet the musicians." **N**

DATE The 25th edition of the Afrikafestival Hertme will be July 6-7 2013

ONLINE www.afrikafestivalhertme.nl