



Daniel Klier

Lotus World Music and Arts Festival

The festival in Bloomington, Indiana, is a four-day celebration of inclusivity as **Erin Hollinden** reports

Every September, the Lotus World Music and Arts Festival delivers a community-fuelled concert series against the backdrop of a quintessential American college town. With grassroots origins and a welcoming spirit, this festival brings together groups from around the globe at the crossroads of the US. It's a mind-expanding, ear-pleasing, eye-popping, all-ages event in Bloomington, Indiana, home of Indiana University.

The handful of musicians who started the festival in 1994 named it 'Lotus' for two reasons. Firstly they were inspired by Lotus Dickey, a beloved southern Indiana singer, fiddler, guitarist and songwriter from the last century, and secondly they thought the lotus flower – which grows in nearby Lake Lemon and all over the world – was a fitting representation of diversity and universality. In its 23 years, the evolving organisation has transported performers from over 120 culturally distinct regions to this pastoral

setting among limestone quarries and fields of ripe corn and soybeans.

Various magazines have ranked Bloomington as America's 'Sixth Best City for Educated Millennials,' 'Sixth Best College Town to Live in Forever,' and the 'Ninth Quirkiest Town in America.' Best known in the US for its zeal for basketball and bicycle racing, Indiana University is better known internationally for its top-ranked Jacobs School of Music. The campus, with sumptuous grounds and 100-year-old Gothic- and Romanesque-style buildings, hosts world-class productions and international music competitions. A vibrant local music scene keeps nightclubs rocking.

Sunni Fass, executive director of the Lotus Education & Arts Foundation, says the festival has its own immersive sense of place, different from events in big fields, fairgrounds or stadiums. It sprawls over a ten-block, pedestrian-friendly area around the charming county courthouse, which was built in 1908 in

the Beaux Arts style. Venues include street tents booming with rowdy dance music, churches where subtle instrumentalists enthrall hushed audiences, and an ornate theatre built in 1922 for silent movies. Local breweries and wineries serve libations al fresco, alongside food trucks and excellent restaurants with outdoor seating. Sampling the local food scene is reason enough to attend.

Each evening offers over six hours of music from more than 15 artists. The festival is devoutly egalitarian and 'non-headliner' orientated, promoting exploration and discovery. Attendees flit from show to show – some strategically, some randomly – stopping for a few songs or lingering for entire sets. Crowds navigate with ease using the Lotusfest app or phone-friendly schedule PDFs. First-timers tend to focus on big showcases, while many veterans gravitate toward acoustic and time-honoured music.

The line-up is always fresh and most of the performers have never been to Indiana. Each year, a striking roster of acts from all continents comes together. Reggae, funk, rap, EDM, urban fusion, classical and traditional groups are all represented. Thought-provoking, accordion-heavy folk draws overflow crowds. High-energy, inventive bands keep hundreds of punters dancing all weekend. All groups considered, the average number of instruments per Lotus musician is hard to beat – especially with all the horns!



Ethiopian group Fendika



The Indiana festival exudes joyous eclecticism – in both its artistic programming and the range of festival-goers who return year after year



Mokoomba

Jim Kruse; Michael Redman; Garret J Poortinga; Kevin Atkins

And the jubilation is palpable when bands from Yemen and Sudan bust out resonating hip-hop songs about liberation.

"Lotus always feels very intimate," says Fass, "even when 12,000 people are here. Our audience has hippies, hipsters, business professionals, university professors, students and young families with children. Also, we take great care to focus on the balance and mix of the experience, for both audiences and artists." The mix combines new and veteran performers, and in 2016, ten out of 32 acts were led or co-led by women.

Fass believes the Lotus artists and audiences defy demographic stereotypes. She comments: "there's this image that older people prefer the quiet venues and younger people prefer the dance bands in the big tents, but that doesn't play out in reality. I can confidently say there will be people over the age of 70 rushing the stage for (Swedish rap trio) Movits!"

Much of the fun is watching artists talk and take in each other's shows. Polish ethno-jazz folk singers make friends and share fan bases with South Asian Sufi poets. Palenke Soultribe's leader and bassist Juan Diego Borda

sums up most artists' excitement at being part of the party by closing Palenke's 2016 set with "Viva Colombia! Viva America! Viva Indiana!"

With both ticketed and free access shows, people can discover plenty of music and art at no charge. Out of over 60 hours of events each year, 40 or more are completely free, including the interactive Arts Village and 'Festival Unwind: Yoga in the Park.' Tickets cost the same as or less than most standalone concerts or theatre productions.

"I'm always amazed that Lotus is able to offer so much for so little," says Fass, "especially since similar events of this scale are usually put on by city governments or universities. We're a very small non-profit organisation, and ticket revenues only cover about 50% of our costs. We do a considerable amount of fundraising to keep ticket prices low and to provide accessible programming."

At Lotus in the Park on Saturday afternoon, children in tie-dyed T-shirts, students in IU T-shirts, and white-haired couples in rock band T-shirts enjoy artisan workshops –making baskets, carving wood, painting icons and the like. Last year, Maryann Talia Pau, from Samoa

via New Zealand, taught people to weave stars for her One Million Stars to End Violence project. The stars will constitute an installation at the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games.

A typical line-up for the park's sunny stage features back-to-back bands playing southern blues, Native American percussion, and traditional Brazilian *choro* music. Pairings of traditional instruments with similar sounds but different cultural origins embodies the essence of the event.

The Lotus Foundation's mission has grown to include perennial visual arts and instructive programming. Lotus Blossoms Educational Outreach, for example, brings artist educators from other countries into schools. The foundation and the festival have helped make Bloomington an extraordinary place to learn about cultures from the many far-flung lands where lotus flowers grow and songs of country fiddlers float over dusky fields at harvest time. ♦

+ DATES This year's Lotus World Music and Arts Festival will be September 28-October 1
+ ONLINE www.lotusfest.org