

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

OSLO WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL

NORWAY

Desert blues meets brass-battling Serbs and passionate Nigerian soul in the November rain of Oslo during its annual musical shindig. Viking helmets are optional...

WORDS MODE STEINKJER
PHOTOS LARS OPSTAD UNLESS STATED

As the chilling Nordic darkness covers the Oslo skyline in the first week of November, the spotlight will once again be placed on a wonderful range of musical diversity, as a small group of enthusiasts at the Oslo World Music Festival host another colourful musical adventure.

Earlier this year on July 22, another kind of darkness hit the capital of Norway. A terror attack devastated the political centre of downtown Oslo, followed by the massacre on the island of Utøya. Young people discussing politics became the victims of a nationalistic fundamentalist aiming not at the innocent kids alone, but at important values such as democracy, multi-ethnicity and freedom of expression. For those who have followed Oslo World Music Festival (OWMF) since its incarnation in 1994, this year's festival will come as a strong manifestation of what's good about the Norwegian society.

During a sad summer, music played an important role to alleviate the grief following the massacre. And music is an important part of Oslo, a city radiating a unique blend of modern urbanity and mundane provinciality. Oslo is a rather small community, with approximately 600,000 inhabitants sharing the bay area dividing the Oslo Fjord from the idyllic Nordmarka – with its vast forests and small fishing lakes only a few stops on the Metro outside the city hub.

Once a year, the Oslo World Music Festival hits town with help from the government institution Rikskonsertene (Concerts Norway), who fund the annual festivities of music, international collaboration and cross-cultural achievement. This year, however, the department of culture will restructure Rikskonsertene and one of the consequences is that the festival itself will be cut loose,



Flamenco star Diego El Cigala who has played at OWMF

making its future uncertain. That said, the festival seems stronger than ever, with legendary guitar virtuoso Paco de Lucia and desert rebellion Bombino among the line-up. Add Juju – the explosive blend of Justin Adams' wide-angle perspective on music and Juldeh Camara's one string expression of the West African sensibility – and you get an idea of what OWMF is all about.

Festival director Alexandra Archetti Stølen explains: "our main goal is to present high-quality music from all over the world, with a focus on Africa, Asia and Latin America. Every year, we aim to bring a mix of big names and up-and-coming artists. We are proud of having developed the festival to become one of the leading of its

kind in Scandinavia. We also think that presenting music in a wide range of genres, languages and traditions broadens people's interest in music and culture outside the commercial charts."

The festival started out as Verden i Norden in 1994, and it became the Oslo World Music Festival in 2002. On the one hand, OWMF offers a week of joy, excitement and rhythms and impulses from all over the world. On the other, it is a festival reflecting the world itself by introducing artists not only through music, but also through their political and social achievement. In previous years themes have included 'Borders' and 'Strong Female Voices.' This combination of quality music

and topical themes is highly appreciated by a mostly Oslo-oriented audience.

'Dream' is the byword for the 2011 edition. The festival will scatter stardust across 13 venues; from the jazz and world music club Cosmopolite, to the Oslo Konserthus. "Working in limbo makes us dream," says Stølen, in reference to the festival being taken out of Concerts Norway and the changes in its structure and support.

The 'Dream' theme will no doubt be in evidence on the opening night of November 2, with the spectacular *DhakaBrakha: Dreams Of The Lost Road*. The Ukrainian group DakhaBrakha will combine folk music with 3D lasers, dancers and Nikolai Gogol, set in the former factory building Vulkan, a soon-to-be indoor food market near the river of Akerselva. This is yet another exciting location for a festival living and breathing in a city undergoing rapid

architectural development.

This way of presenting music has become an OWMF trademark. Last year, Stølen and her team programmed AfroCubism and Gotan Project. In 2009, they had not only Staff Benda Bilili grace the concert stage, but also the podium at the House of Literature in Oslo. The band's lecture about their journey from the streets of Kinshasa to world fame is one of the festival's most memorable moments. On stage, there's been Toumani Diabaté, Ali Farka Touré, Amadou & Mariam, Mariza, Tinariwen and Rokia Traoré together with Norwegian singer Kristin Asbjørnsen from Krøyt. This variety of artists has given OWMF an impressive reputation, not only because of its intimate atmosphere, but also because of their ability to attract top shelf world artists. This year is no exception.

As Stølen says, "Never before has our theme and our artistic excellence felt more



Top: Cosmopolite, which hosts many of the festival's larger concerts
Left: Oslo's glass-fronted Konserthus



Senegalese singer and gimbri player Nuru Kane



French band Caravan Palace performing at the OWMF

right than this year. Eighteen years after it began and this is probably our strongest year."

The range of venues gives the organisers the ability to provide each artist with its core audience – among them the internationally recognised Rockefeller Music Hall. The ultimate Balkan Brass Battle with Fanfare Ciocărlia and Boban & Marko Marković Orkestar is a typical Rockefeller act this year, so is Egyptian pop star Hakim. In Jakob's

During a sad summer, music played an important role to alleviate the grief following the massacre

church you will be able to seek quieter acts like *oud* maestro Anouar Brahem. At the other end of the scale you have the small, intimate and always packed Parkteatret, an old converted cinema in the former labour district Grünerløkka, hosting Asa, Nneka, Oquestrada and Chilean rapper Ana Tijoux. As a result of these collaborations, the festival often arranges debates and meetings. This year, Iranian singer and Freemuse award-winner Mahsa Vahdat and fellow *Lullabies* from the *Axis of Evil* artist Rim Banna are among the delegates that will share their stories during a session called 'Dreamtalk'. Another benefit are the Childrens' Days during the weekend part of the festival, when families gather in the lively and distinctly ethnically mixed Grønland part of Oslo to experience good food, Sámi *joik*, salsa, DJs, hip-hop dancers and *capoeira* artists.

All of this simply emphasises the validity and importance of a festival that once again will reflect the world's ability to embrace life and fight injustice and oppression. ●

DATE This year's Oslo World Music Festival, runs from November 2-6

ONLINE www.rikskonsertene.no

TAKING YOU WHERE THE MUSIC HAPPENS

Songlines Music Travel has a wide range of festival trips on offer, including to the Cape Verde Kriol Jazz Festival. See p29 or www.songlinesmusictravel.com

SONGLINES MUSIC TRAVEL