

The Parking Lots of Summerfest

by Joe Milutis

We were the denizens of the outside, and oh what an outside! I mean, here was reality! Inside, steel and lights and engines were spinning around like the lost causes of the mad house. Outside: steel and lights and engines again, but rather their more philosophical counterparts. For now. Exemplars of reason these Pontiacs, these Plymouths, these Volkswagon Jettas when not actually driven by those fleshy beings who will soon impress upon more rational metal a compulsion for one last wild ride of the evening. In this netherzone of fluorescent cones and official yellow windbreakers, all must make a journey—barely noted or best forgotten, the thoughtless trek from the festival—through an obscurity only mildly cut by glowing wands and blinking amulets. But think on the outside of things! These are the Parking Lots of Summerfest and here is where you will find us. But reader, I do not here represent the beleaguered parking lot attendant, nor the city police, who, in tandem insouciantly direct industrious crowds determined to sink the spit of land that hosts Summerfest into the lake. My goal is not to illumine these faceless proletariats, as if to say, *noblesse oblige*, “these are the true heroes of Summerfest.” No, for we are the true heroes of Summerfest!

Are we street performers? Well, if we were playing twenty-questions you may now have hit the mark. I can't be too coy about this, after all, this is what may be called “journalism,” and the 5 w's are flapping around my head like crazy bats that got through a tear in the window screen. Although what I do fear is that “street performer” may conjure up an image that I do not intend, some scruffy but skillful troubadour, say, or chanteuse sprouted as if from the sidewalk crack. My girls are magnificent, neither scruffy, wholly skillful, nor anything close to an organic excrescence of the pavement. S_____ looks as if she is a ballerina from a Toulouse Lautrec painting. Her tutu is fluorescent orange and yellow, and a single red feather extends from the back of her head. In the headlights her face is pale as if from too much absinthe. T_____ is wearing a diner waitress' dress, perhaps once hers, but now cut all the way up to her panty line, and scalloped about the neck and arms. She fills this hotrod service industry outfit plentifully, as if to say, “I am a waitress but plenty more!” Something that looks like a white mop has, revolution of revolutions, been inverted to become her wig. They will sing backup and do interpretive dance on an unlit plot of grass, while I play about 5 different golden oldies (count 'em: five) that are amenable to the canned beats of a Casiotone keyboard circa 1983. Look how far this writer will go to give you a taste of the Parking Lots of Summerfest! We will also sing new songs just for you (they'd start something like “Jenny is the name of a person who's leaving Summerfest. Doo-doo-doo” or “Bob is really drunk, he can't stand up. Oh-yeah”). Did I forget to tell you that this writer is wearing green waffle print pants that are both floods and bellbottoms? They are held to his slight physique (I am a writer not a linebacker) by a pink belt with a gold medallion à la *L'Uomo Vogue*. A simple “wife beater” topped with a peppermint sequined vest recalls a more innocent century. Get out the Pulitzers.

We have no stage, and we are merely contemplating the possibility of microphones and portable amplification. The songs are barely practiced. We're lit with votive candles and only once had some high-tech

lighting when an SUV in the opposite lot was kind enough to home its highbeams on us for a good twenty minutes while we staged a raucous improvisational set. (It is only later that I develop a suspicion that they are videographers of the cowardly sort who can be found at the public beaches—telephoto voyeurs and pornographers *manqué*.) Yet for all our lack of resources, more than once we are called “the best of Summerfest.” Why is this? We do not even have the Summerfest imprimatur, so let me quickly say that we are in no way affiliated with Summerfest and that this statement is wildly inaccurate and I hope with this clarification I may ward off angry phonecalls from Summerfest organizers. Summerfest is as Summerfest does, suffice to say. There are many reasons why Summerfest is the best at what it is, just as we are the best at what we do.

I will gloss over our avant-garde pedigrees which would account for an expertise in the arts of surprise and guerrilla show-biz encounters. My feeling, however, is that this minstrel band attracts the ne'er-do-well at the heart of every festival goer. Our songs go to the secret source of all dissatisfaction. They sing to that closet anti-socialite within, the one who finds the tawdry lights, the upside-down entertainments, the obsessive fireworking, and the jaded megastars all a little bit dreary. The miraculous arabesques of these ladies of mystery behind me remind you that you didn't want to come, that someone dragged you here. Or something. And that thing can be heard in the distance as you exit, roaring for more behind you. *Get thee behind me* . . .

Singing “Save the Last Dance for Me” one more time, we decide it is time to pack up and go. The wind off the lake has picked up, and the music has blown everywhere, even though T_____ has used up a wad of tape taping it to the music stand. The candles have long gutted, and the crowd is no longer the tipping sort. We are only assailed by hangers on who I must matter-of-factly remind, “These are working girls.” It's midnight at Summerfest. Now we are finished, and it's time to surrender our plot of land. But the adventure has just begun. Getting out of the Parking Lots of Summerfest is not for the faint of heart! The group has experienced damage of a sort. S_____, the Lautrecian odalisque, has bashed her toe which bleeds and risks infection. She is also steadily bleeding down her leg from her period, having rushed the insertion of her last tampon. We are on foot and, laden with gear, must become another element of the crowd, however difficult or even absurd this conformity might seem. And one never knows how such crowds might react to the smell of blood. A woman yells to us, “Why so glum?!” which strikes us as humorous given what we are wearing. But indeed, we have become sad clowns on this walk of shame to the shuttles. What strange foreboding assails us? A passerby drapes a flashing red bauble around my neck like they do at Hawaiian luaus, but I get the feeling that this “ALOHA” does not mean “hello” but an unsettling “goodbye.” Our fears become justified when we turn a corner. There they are: yellow school busses which will go both to corner bar and far Wisconsin outpost. These Blue Birds of doom are filled to standing. Here, in the shadow of the Hone bridge, there are no lights, and a barbed wire fence extends into the distance.

The whole scene is a cross between *Schindler's List* and *MTV Beach Party*. One can imagine S. S. strolling Dobermans and yelling “Mach schnell” to these tanned goyim in halter tops and baseball caps. We ask one cheerful passenger where her bus is going and she says “Sheboygan,” and it wouldn't have surprised us if she just as cheerfully said “Dachau.” A Frenchman of note, in regards the Parking Lots of Disney, has spoken of “the absolute soli-

tude of [its] parking lot—a veritable concentration camp.” Here, in contrast, we have nothing less than the absolute chaos and hysteria of the nazi train platforms. A woman to our left is screaming, crying into her cell phone, bent over double as if to vomit into its receiver: “Why did you leave me here! Why did you leave me here!” and with this I am reminded of the recent sunny feature in the *Journal Sentinel*, titled “Cell Phones are the Communication of Choice at Summerfest.” When I read this, I thought, “Cell phones? Improbable! Who does this writer think he is, Jules Verne?” But here is the very thing. I silently appreciate the value of good journalistic legwork. It is worth noting that this woman, now wracked with abject despair over her Nokia, looks good, dressed for a night out. Perhaps she was not good enough for her persecutor, now safely out of the Lots. I have increased the Casiotone rhythm to the highest possible beats per minute and am now safely off to the side, playing a combination Japanese noise music and Italian folk melody . . . as the drunken, the violent, and the blithe promenade.

As soon as our bus arrives, a war cry goes up from the driver as the vehicle is penetrated from both ends. As the men who have barreled through the front entrance meet up with those who have taken the opportunity of the emergency door meet mid bus, a fight breaks out, based on whether or not the people that have gone through the emergency door think they are “special.” While we are waiting through the incriminations and the threats of violence, I am confronted by what, for lack of a better term, I would call one of Summerfest's very own “critics at large.” He feels that my peppermint stripped vest and gigolo pants, which, need I remind you, are at once bell bottoms and floods, are not suitable for the festival. He, in contrast, is wearing a white baseball cap (with no logo), white polo (ditto), khaki shorts (dunno), and TEVAs (this logo is even a fictionalization after the fact). He is the missing link, right after the Piltown man: he is Generic Man. Reader, I will leave it for you to decide who is in appropriate festival attire, or even who is farther along the evolutionary chain. Is it necessary to clarify for him that we are not at the festival anymore, but we are in the Parking Lots of Summerfest, a distinction as radical as that between the veldts of Africa and the bistros of Manhattan? I think that, if the question were, rather, whose outfit would be more quickly recognized in the headlights of a road raging, half-blind-with-Sprecher suburbanite, then I, your humble secretary, would surely win out. It's survival of the fittest, pure and simple.

T_____ has better luck making friends. She's told in a sisterly manner, “People shouldn't gawk at you guys. You're not retards!” S_____ is in the worst position. The one least at ease with such crowds, S_____ has been split up from T_____ and I. Only her red feather is visible, like an exclamation point reminding us of the silent vulnerability of her period. As the bus starts, I try to ease in with those around me by composing a soundtrack for the ride, but stop because a drunk writhing on the seat to my right whimpers, “Stop playing the crazy carnival music!” I am soon fielding requests, and have never heard of the songs mentioned. The woman behind me is trying to teach me a song that goes something like, “do you want to try my jelly” and the man I'm sitting with is crooning to me something like “let me get deep inside you.” I quickly suggest a rousing spiritual. Fights are in the streets. Police, drivers, kids from the bus and pedestrians all are in the melee. Girls from our bus are screaming themselves hoarse out the window “You're so immature! You're so immature!” Hands occasionally reach up and grab through the windows from the
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streets, fists hit the glass. The emergency exit is not a few times opened when a shouting match between someone in the bus and someone on the street turns ugly. T_____ and I are singing "Amazing Grace" like missionaries running scared.

As the bus exits the labyrinthine streets of the Summerfest peninsula and turns onto KK, the ride becomes more mellow. The pall of the Parking Lots of Summerfest has lifted. The man I'm

sitting with describes in detail his job at Clark Graphics. The woman behind me admits, "I just want to come here to meet people." We discourse about the relations between the sexes. The men agree: "The woman always chooses," leaving some women to ponder. Then, just as soon as it began, the bus stops and unloads everybody at the bars for perhaps one more bout of disorientation and anomie before closing. We make our way to T_____ 's apartment to count money in the kitchen before dispersing. S_____ face is completely

drained of color. T_____ chatters on about the songs as she fixes lemonade. Between the three of us, two with advanced degrees, one an Ivy League dropout, we have amassed some \$28.00, roughly \$9.00 and change for each of us. Although, hour per hour, the pay is worse—but not by much—than our lecturer's salaries, we feel the compulsion—the magnetic pull, the ineluctable force that the Parking Lots of Summerfest exert on us all—to return again.