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For more than 30 years, Glastonbury has been the festival global superstars want to play. But why? What is the attraction of all that mud and mayhem? Crispin Aubrey and John Shearlaw find out

Crispin Aubrey and John Shearlaw
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Michael Eavis, farmer

In 1970, I went with Jean, who was then my girlfriend, to the blues festival held at the Bath & West Showground. I thought, "This is great, this is wonderful." I'd been working hard to keep the farm going, and I thought maybe we could do this as a diversion, or as well as the farming, to help deal with the overdraft, which even then was £5,000. So I came back, got on the phone the next morning, phoned some bands and got some agents' numbers from the phone book. I was really keen on it, I thought this was terrific. So we got the show going in the autumn.

Marc Bolan was offered to me instead of the Kinks, who cried off at the last minute. The Kinks would have been great, but then Marc Bolan was even better. He'd had a hit song with Ride A White Swan and was very fashionable.

I remember meeting him halfway down Muddy Lane, and he didn't look too pleased at going down this bumpy track in his big American car. So he wound down the window and said, "Which way's the stage, man?" The car was covered in some sort of suede material and, to be friendly, I put out my hand to stroke it. Then Marc jumped out and said, "Don't touch my car, man!" It wasn't a good start, but then he went on to play one of the best sets we ever had.

Financially, it was a struggle. We eventually lost £1,500 on that first event, which I didn't really have, so to pay Marc Bolan I had to put aside so much a month from the milk cheque. He charged £500, which wasn't much compared with what he was worth at the time.

David Bowie, performer

It was 1971 and I was bottom of the bill. I remember my going-on-stage time being shoved later and later (I was originally scheduled to go on around midnight or so) but things got so delayed that I didn't make it on stage till around five in the morning. So, what better than to spend the intervening hours ensconced in the farmhouse, along with a crew of latter-day hippies, singer Terry Reid and all kinds of mushrooms? By the time I was due to perform, I was flying and could hardly see my little electric keyboard or my guitar. I have no recollection of the show itself, although I seem to recall a strange girl getting up on stage and whirling away, mostly without any music playing, while the audience cheerfully awoke from its slumbers.

Julie Christie, actor

I went with Nic Roeg, who was making a film, Alfie Bengé [painter and poet now married to Robert Wyatt, the musician], who was my pal and festival-buddy, and a bunch of other friends. We went to festivals at that time - that's what we did - and the word was that this was going to be amazing and different. What we did was try to catch the bands we particularly liked. We tried not to eat too much, so as to avoid having to sit on the very public toilet trench. The rest of the time, we wandered around what was like a huge, exotic town out of a science fiction story that had suddenly mushroomed up in this field. There was always something new to see, glorious sights, you could wander into anyone's tent and be welcomed on floors covered with kilims and walls hung with tapestries. Everyone talked to everyone else, and the air was vibrating with sexuality. People seemed to be so beautiful in their breathtaking finery - or indeed without it. Two images that stay with me are

of a big carthorse - the kind you hardly ever see nowadays - with a whole naked family sitting on its back, and of a naked motorcyclist, his penis laid tidily out in front of him. I remember David Bowie because his music was wonderful and, like so many of the boys, he looked like a girl. I remember the Guru Maharaji because he arrived in a limousine and he had these terribly posh shiny shoes on - no one else had shoes, so they stood out. I have not been back - I left England for a while after that, and the music had changed when I came back to live in England again and somehow I never got round to it, although people I know who have been say it is just as wonderful as it was.

Rolf Harris, performer

My first time was in 1993, during an incredibly hot summer. I think they booked me as a bit of a joke. They'd put me on early on the Sunday morning, when I think they assumed most people would be asleep. I was all right until I got to Glastonbury in the car and saw the huge crowd and all the tents. I tell you, the nerves started to kick in, and by the time I was backstage, unloading my kit, I was beginning to think it was all a big mistake. But as I lugged my accordion case up the ramp, a huge cockney stagehand slapped me on the back and said, "You're the only one I'm interested in seeing here today, son." He really put my mind at ease. When I eventually walked out on to the stage and saw the audience for the first time, it knocked my socks off. They reckon there were 80,000 people there that morning and they'd all got out of bed to see me. They seemed to stretch to the horizon like a brightly coloured blanket with a million tents behind them. I kicked off with Jake The Peg (with the extra leg), and shouted, "What about that, Jake the bloody Peg at Glastonbury?" And the crowd went mad. The whole place sang every single word with me. There were a dozen or so people in the crowd with didgeridoos, holding them up for everyone to see. By the time we played Sun Arise, the volume from the audience was so loud, I couldn't hear myself or the band. And, of course, we all sang Stairway To Heaven together, which was funny, because Robert Plant was playing that year as well.

Billy Bragg, performer

I've played every year except one since 1992, and a lot of the 1980s as well. In 1995, the tent was so packed that my guitar got broken. I had to abandon the semi-acoustic set I'd played in favour of a full-on punk set. What makes Glastonbury unique among the major rock festivals is that the site is miles from anywhere. It's not tacked on to a dormitory town or in a purpose-built arena, there's no cosy link with civilisation. The challenge of how to get there is the same for stars and punters alike - narrow back lanes filled with wandering hitchhikers and trucks all searching for the speediest way in. And, once you're there, you're there. There's just no point in trying to come and go as you please. How much time and money have bands spent checking into hotels in Shepton Mallet, only to waste the day sitting in their coach waiting for the drummer and his girlfriend to get back from the Jazz Field? There are even those who never leave the charmed enclosure behind the Pyramid stage for fear of mingling with the great unwashed.

Norman Cook, aka Fatboy Slim, performer

Glastonbury was not so much about the bands, it was about being there. And my motto is still "Have records, will play", even if there are gallons of mud. The first year I actually did the Dance Tent, in 1997, I looked around and said, "This is where I'm supposed to be at last." And by 2000 I'd got up to my fourth year running, probably more from my insistence than them actually inviting me back. There was trouble the year before that, because of everyone trying to get into the tent at once, the height of Normanmania. It's quite flattering to be remembered as the fire risk. I remember, at the height of my fame, trudging up to some faraway field and asking if I could DJ at the Minuscule Of Sound: capacity six people, billed as the smallest nightclub in the world. They didn't bat an eyelid, and asked me if I had a demo tape.

I started going with Zoe [Ball] when we got married, but she'd been there before, independently. We ended up comparing notes: "Were you the bloke that was doing that thing with the ... ?" she'd say, because our paths had crossed a couple of times. Now Zoe's got a policy of not working. At one point, we were camped right by the Dance Tent, when she was pregnant, and she was saying, "This is wrong!" She could feel her chest vibrating from the bass bins. "My chest's vibrating - the baby's vibrating!" She had to leg it over to Babington House for a rest.

Glastonbury is great for kids, after a certain age. We were debating what age we should start taking our son, Woody. It's lovely seeing families there, but perhaps not camped by the Dance Tent. And keep the Cuban Brothers away. Or at a safe distance.

I hope to be a fixture at Glastonbury for ever. By the time I'm 50, I'll be in a little tent on the outer fringes somewhere. And people will be really nostalgic and say things like, "Remember when we used to dance to DJs playing records?"

Chris Martin, performer

The Glastonbury festival, which everybody knows is the greatest event in the entire world, changed our world immeasurably: from the first time Coldplay played there as a new band, when we witnessed the whole event like everybody else does, to the last time we played there headlining the Pyramid stage. We love it to bits, the whole deal. The greatest moment was driving in a car with Michael Eavis in late 2001. He turned around and asked us if we'd headline the following year and we thought he was joking for about 10 minutes. And then we realised he was serious. That's probably one of the best things that has ever happened to us. Even if we'd never played Glastonbury, we would still think it was the best festival of all time. It is special because it has so much variety, is run not by a faceless corporation but by an amazing family, and because wearing one of the wristbands makes you cool for a long time afterwards.

Moby, performer

I think it is different, in a way that things happen here that maybe don't happen anywhere else. I was ambushed by a guy dressed as a fairy. He was trying to get on stage with me, asking and asking. I had to deal with him on my own; I don't know how he got there. I was giving him these lame excuses, like "Health and safety has already been worked out" and "I'm really sorry - we can't have anyone else on stage". And still no one really knew where he appeared from. It was so good to be back at Glastonbury again, and I felt I was really privileged to headline on the Sunday. I decided to play some of my older stuff, my more upbeat stuff, to get a party thing going. It's such a great atmosphere, a great experience. It's really spiritual, a gathering of the people together. I had a really great time the first time I played here, and I wasn't even headlining on the main stage. It was really quite a small crowd compared with what I'm used to now. To be asked to come back, and headlining, I felt really honoured. I never thought I'd ever do anything as big, playing in front of so many people.

Bill Bailey, comedian

I'm from Keynsham, which is a little place between Bath and Bristol, where the Co-op closes at nine. At Glastonbury, in the Comedy Tent, I had 5,000 people in front of me with their arms up, and I had a brief flash of myself as some pagan, godlike figure. It was blood-boilingly, heart-stoppingly, souldrenchingly exhilarating. I didn't like it at all.

Caitlin Moran, music journalist

I remember PJ Harvey being incredible in 1995, looking slightly anorexic in a pink stretched catsuit, and thinking that every woman in the audience would want to go off and form a band. That was one of the heaviest rock sets I've ever seen any band perform. She was rocking four or five times harder than the Stones, who I also saw around the same time.

Then, the same year, it was Pulp, who came in at the last moment to replace the Stone Roses because John Squire had broken his collarbone. They premiered Sorted For E's And Wizz, and they'd got about three songs into the set and everybody just turned around and said, "We will remember this." They were so awesome, so much energy, it absolutely made their career. You just got the feeling that that was all that Jarvis Cocker had ever wanted, to stand in a field and have 70,000 people worshipping him.

Glastonbury has become a British institution - people are proud of it. It's almost like an annual soap opera - what's the big story, who's going to go crazy this year? But the irony is that although it's often portrayed as youth culture in action, kids taking their tops off, the people really getting into it are the much older freaks dressed as ballerinas or pretending to be dogs. That's what makes it such a surprise. Within the music business itself, it's seen as everybody's holiday, like a weekend in the country, the only fresh air that anybody in Soho sees all year. It's a chance to see the bands they'd never get to watch otherwise. But on the other hand, when the line-up's released, a lot of people in the business often say, "It's rubbish this year - there's nothing worth watching."

For me, those are the good years, because I don't have to stick around the main stages waiting to see what Primal Scream are going to do. I can go off and find something ridiculous, like the weird bloke we found dressed as a caterpillar playing this really odd mixture of Celtic soul and zydeco up in the Green Fields at three o'clock in the morning. He was magical, but he wouldn't tell us his name

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