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How Green Was My Field?

It's Glastonbury time again. We asked festival veterans to share their memories of the mud, sweat and beers (and the music, of course). Interviews by Isabel Lloyd

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Zoe Ball, Xfm DJ

Around 10 years ago, when I was working on Big Breakfast for Channel 4, I managed to blag a ticket to Glastonbury. I borrowed a tent, persuaded one of the guys I worked with to bring a camera, arranged an interview with the Hothouse Flowers and Suede, and off I went.

Unfortunately - without going into too much detail - I ended up enjoying myself far too much and came back with a grand total of six minutes of footage. I told my boss that because there'd been a bit of violence at the festival that year, I didn't think the footage was suitable for Big Breakfast. It certainly wasn't: the camera shots were completely out of focus, the interview with the Hothouse Flowers was inaudible because we shot it in front of a giant sound system, and I hadn't turned up for my interview with Suede because I was too busy dancing in a field somewhere.

But I absolutely loved it, and I've been going ever since. A whole gang of us all camp together - the authorities, bless 'em, always give us the same spot, where the stage crews for the Dance Stage stay. We get told to turn it down a bit sometimes. Someone I met once told me that the funniest thing he'd ever seen at Glastonbury was me climbing down from the top of a Winnebago, where I'd been dancing. Trouble was, I was holding a drink in my hand at the same time, so I slipped, and ended up hanging from the roof by one hand. I was shouting for help to everyone else on top of the Winnebago, but because the music was so loud they couldn't hear me. Then I swung out, bashed my other hand against the side of the caravan, smashed the glass, and fell on to a post. This man said that he and all his friends couldn't come to my aid because they were laughing so much.

Now I feel it might be time to do Glastonbury a different way: the family way. So next time we go Norman [Cook, aka Fatboy Slim] and I will probably stay in the Tipi Field, and wheel our son Woody around in a wheelbarrow.

Matthew Bellamy, Singer and guitarist with Muse

Though I've been to Glastonbury several times, I've never paid to get in. Now I'm going to be playing there, I feel a bit guilty ... The first time was the festival's 25th anniversary year, in 1995, when I was about 17. I went with a group of friends and we met a man outside who had some wood, rope and a drill. He used it to build a strange kind of ladder up the side of the wall, which we all jumped over. The second time I went was one of the two really wet years - '97 or '98. I bumped into a farmer in Pilton who was taking hay bales into the site to help soak up the mud. The farmer let me hide underneath the hay in his trailer and drove me right into the centre of the site; I hopped out with my bag by the Pyramid Stage, camped up on one of the hills, and lost three pairs of shoes in the mud.

The time after that, one of the locals got me in for a tenner. I went up to the Green Field just as it was getting dark at the end of a beautiful sunny day. Groups of people were sitting playing drums and guitar, jamming along to the same overall rhythm, improvising at the same time. It was the definition of what you expect from Glastonbury: people freeing themselves up from the stress in their life.

Muse play the Pyramid Stage on Sunday night

Johnny Marr, Guitarist, formerly of The Smiths

In 1984, Glastonbury wasn't quite the groovy post-dance rite-of-passage that it became in the mid-Nineties. There were no excitable Radio 1 jocks "bringing the vibe from the Healing Fields" (apparently that year was when the festival added the "Green Field" to the two existing fields, the "Big Muddy One" and the "Shit One With No One In"), and there were no VIP reception tents with Camden lovelies and Soho heads out for a weekend blast. If there were, it wouldn't have made any difference to The Smiths anyway: we intended to get in, lay some frantic three-minute NME anthems on the Elvis Costello fans, and leg it out of there for some De Profundis and a spot of camomile tea.

We'd played at the St Austell Coliseum the night before, and I was driven with Morrissey to the site the next afternoon in a white Mercedes. I had mixed feelings about playing there: feelings mixed somewhere between dread and "Er, I suppose so". The minute we got there it started to cloud over; as we were escorted to our unheated, faux-pine Portakabin, I clocked Costello's tour bus. It looked like a mansion. We hung around in our box while Howard Jones or someone did

their thing outside and just before we went on we did a quick photo shoot, which ended up as the inner sleeve of the album *Hatful of Hollow*.

Our gig started off all right, no disasters, just the usual "Why does my guitar sound like it's coming out of the bass amp?" festival thing. I wasn't sure how we'd get on, as we hadn't done too many festivals before - in fact this might well have been the first - but as it turned out there were a lot of Smiths fans around and we got fairly revved up.

About three-quarters of the way through the set a guy clawed his way up the corrugated iron at the front of the stage and clambered up to join us. Whoopee! Then his mate starts to follow. Now all this seems a good idea to me: it's fun, it breaks up the sterile divide between stage and audience, and it's also a bit of a Smiths tradition. Anyway, the security didn't see it that way, and set about throwing our guests down as fast as they could. As this contravened the first law of the stage - which states that "once the guitar is plugged in, the band makes the rules ..." I got into a tussle with one of the crew, and the fans decided this was the moment to liberate the gig. Ace.

I started to pull 'em up by the armful, while the band kept on going. Sometimes stage invasions at Smiths' gigs were a bit silly, as it was a drag for the rest of the crowd. But this was all right, the sound didn't go off, no one got hurt, and it livened up the day a bit.

After all the jollity, we were again escorted to our box. The sky opened, thunder roared and it poured down. Time to go then, over to the Merc, in the mud ... to find that the stage crew has slashed our tyres.

At that time I hadn't read the small print of the first law of the stage - the bit that says "... and pays the consequences". It didn't matter, though, it was worth it: I'm glad we played, even if we never got the camomile tea.

Alex Paterson, Founder member of The Orb, "inventors" of ambient house

I'm a Londoner, and to be honest I used to stick me nose up at the crusties. For a long time the best thing about Glastonbury, as far as I was concerned, was that it made the area I lived in - Notting Hill - much cleaner and quieter for at least one weekend every June. But I have had my good Glastonbury moments. I reckon my proudest achievement was creating fake lightning, during our first gig there, back in 1993. We were headlining the NME stage, and the lighting crew built a system that would send an electrical bolt up into the sky if I pressed a particular sample key on my keyboard. There was particularly low cloud that evening; I pressed the sample, the majority of the crowd looked up, and boom ... it looked like lightning came out of the sky and hit the stage. Even now some fans aren't sure whether it was a coincidence or not.

These days, it's all getting too middle-aged - I mean, Rolf Harris playing Glastonbury? What's the point?

The Orb's latest album, 'Bicycles and Tricycles', is out now on Hexus/Cooking Vinyl

Rolf Harris, Entertainer

It was after one of my four performances at Glastonbury - the one where they almost had to cancel because too many people were trying to get into the field to see my show. I was sitting signing autographs for a huge long queue of fans. I'd ask each person who I should sign it to, and they'd say "Frieda" or such like, so I'd write "to Frieda, with love from Rolf Harris". Then a chap comes up to the desk and, when I ask him, "Who to?" he says, "Willie Nelson". I looked up and saw this chap all dressed up like Willie Nelson, with the hat and the plaited hair - he was even doing an American accent. I thought he was a bit silly, so I gave him a snide look, wrote "To WN, from Rolf Harris" and off he went.

About half an hour later my musical director grabbed me, very excited, and said: "Wasn't that fantastic!" "Wasn't what fantastic?" "Willie Nelson actually standing in line to get your autograph! He's playing the main stage today but he came over to see your show first!"

I wrote such an apologetic letter to Willie in New York, but I never got an answer. Maybe he'll read this, and forgive me.

Bill Bailey, Comic; has performed at Glastonbury every year since 1993

When it really rains, Glastonbury changes into a Dantean circle of hell, where dreadlocked, filth-spattered, hungover people shuffle along robotically on metal tracking, surrounded by liquid mud. It's like some kind of Orwellian art installation: you'll see a bloke sitting cross-legged on a flattened cardboard box outside his tent, quite literally floating on a lake of mud, while drinking a can of Tennents and looking as pleased with himself as if he was on Blackpool beach.

Even the celebrities don't escape the mud. In 1998, the second consecutive mudfest year, Tony Bennett - unlikely as it may sound - was performing on the main stage. Despite the fact that half the crowd had no idea who he was, this immaculately suited crooner appeared, with great élan, at the top of the access ramp that leads down to the stage. Just as the fantastic old musicians in his Vegas show band struck up his first tune, Tony started to make his big entrance down this ramp - which was of course completely covered in shiny, liquid mud. Inevitably, halfway down Tony slipped - his arms went up, his legs went up - and, as one, 40,000 people took a sharp intake of breath. But miraculously, Tony regained his balance, walked on stage like nothing had happened and stepped up to the microphone to say: "What a night!" - just like he was at the Las Vegas Ballroom. What a man.

Bill Bailey plays the Brighton Dome tonight; for details of other dates visit www.bill-bailey.co.uk

Sister Bliss, DJ and keyboard player with Faithless

The first time I went to Glastonbury was in 1987, and in those days the tickets cost about about £16. I remember getting creamy, unpasteurised milk from Michael Eavis's [the Festival's founder] cows. My first encounter with the Glastonbury toilets was also memorable, but in a different and less pleasurable way.

I went again, as a punter, in the late 1980s, and have since played there three or four times - the first time being 1998, a World Cup year. We were on at the same time as the England vs Columbia match, so it was gratifying that anyone turned up at all - especially as it was also pissing with rain, and everyone was standing there in their wellies.

2002 was a special year for us; I remember it as a kind of homecoming, a vindication of eight years of hard work. It was still daylight when we came on, but night fell as we were performing and the atmosphere just lifted and lifted. We were warming up for Coldplay, so the crowd hadn't even turned up to see us, but they were a real gift. I've got the performance on video and I watch it regularly. I reckon we made Coldplay play better because of it!

Tim Booth, Solo artist, ex-frontman of James

All of our gigs at Glastonbury have been magical, for different reasons. Around 1986, James played it for the first time. It was one of the wet years, and the mud came as something of a shock: we were towed into what looked like a refugee camp. I mean this was meant to be a fun weekend in the English countryside, and instead we were surrounded by people covered head to toe in mud. It's one of those situations, though, where you get so drenched you eventually surrender and start to enjoy yourself. In fact it was kind of romantic, playing in our wellies on a small stage to 20 people, some sheep and a few chickens.

The next time we played was after "Sit Down" had been a hit, in 1989. We had a slot in the afternoon, just before Del Amitri. The Glastonbury authorities wanted to move us to the slot after Del Amitri, because we were bigger than them by then, but they refused - which was fair enough, we would have done the same. So we went on as planned, and had an amazing concert: when we sang "Sit Down", the whole crowd - I don't know how many thousands of people - sat down. I think at that point Del Amitri must have really regretted having to follow us. To top it all, afterwards I went to the grassy area backstage, where my 13-month-old son was waiting. He walked 15 steps towards me: those were his first steps. Not so much sit down, as stand up ... what a lovely day.

Tim Booth's debut solo album, 'Bone', is out now on Sanctuary/Rough Trade

Attila the Stockbroker, Punk poet, musician and comic; has performed at every Glastonbury since 1981

Last year was the first time I walked the whole site. I walked from where we camped, about two miles to some godforsaken tent in the middle of nowhere to see John Cale play. He's one of my absolute heroes. I've got everything he's ever done, and to see him play in some far-flung tent to a small crowd of devotees at one o'clock in the morning before stumbling back to bed in the dark ... well, that's Glastonbury: it's brilliant at combining the absolute mainstream rrock! culture with alternative culture.

Glastonbury has become so much bigger and more commercial over the years, but still the heart of the festival is the same. It's still wonderfully diverse, in the sense that you can go as a young indie kid who knows damn all about anything apart from a few trendy bands that he read about in the NME, or as 46-year-old punk poet who's been there and done that, and still have the most fantastic time. The poet is going to get to see an awful lot of bands that he otherwise wouldn't hear - and the young indie kid will, if he's got any gumption at all, get exposed to all sorts of things that he won't encounter in his usual, lager-stewed existence. It's that which I think makes Glastonbury the best festival in the world.

Attila the Stockbroker will be performing in several different shows at Glastonbury this year; details at www.attilathestockbroker.com

Jo Whiley, Radio 1 DJ; regularly presents the BBC's TV coverage of Glastonbury

Radiohead headlined the Saturday night of that apocalyptic Glastonbury in 1997. The weather was just hideous. Stages were literally sinking, bands were being cancelled (I remember Kenickie turning up and just waiting around hopelessly in their wellies), people were saying goodbye as if they were never going to see each other again... it was awful. But while I was finishing off that evening's TV coverage with John Peel, in the distance we heard Radiohead doing "No Surprises", and suddenly all these fireworks started to go off. It was incredible, one of those spine-tingling moments, when against all odds music can transcend its surroundings and take you to another place.

Mind you, Peel's reaction was: "I never could see what people saw in that band." (We were having our usual musical differences.) But he still gave me a piggyback to my caravan was because the mud was so thick. What a gent.

Tim Burgess, Frontman of The Charlatans

In 1986, New Order were the headline act at Glastonbury. I was about 17 or 18, a Manchester kid who spent most of his time just following the band around, and so naturally I went down in my mate's Vauxhall Cavalier to see them.

They were brilliant. They closed with a great cover of "Sister Ray" by the Velvet Underground, a song I was really into at the time; Bernard [Sumner, the band's frontman] smashed his guitars up, which I'd never seen him do before... the whole thing was an amazing experience. It really broadened my horizons: up until then the only thing I knew about music was New Order; but now in a single weekend I saw a blues band called Barrence Whitfield and the Savages, the Weather Prophets, Husker Du and, if I remember rightly, Primal Scream. It took me into another dimension musically, and music's been the most important part of my life ever since.

Plus I met some pretty interesting people - like the bare-chested guy called Gladiator who got everyone's camp fires going. That was something I'd not come across before, either...

The Charlatans' new single, "Try Again Today" (Universal/Island), is out on 26 July

Billy Bragg, Singer-songwriter

In 2000, I took Boris Johnson to Glastonbury on a wheeze. I had got into an argument with him at the Spectator offices one day, and accused him of being not wholly an Englishman because he'd never been to Glastonbury. He was quite taken aback: "My God," he said, "d'you think I've missed something?" So I asked him to come down with me for the day while I did some filming for the BBC.

We had the best time. Boris got a henna tattoo on his forearm (it was still there when he was selected as MP for Henley not long after); we bought some silly hats; then he got up on the poetry stage and recited some of Homer's Iliad in the original, classical Greek - which sounded scarily like he was growling. If the audience weren't on drugs it must have been confusing; if they were on drugs they probably didn't believe what they'd just seen: "Blimey, that last bloke really looked like Boris Johnson..." Also at one point we were standing talking and some nude people came up and invaded Boris's personal space. That freaked him out. He'd never encountered nude people before - not without being formally introduced, anyway.

So then we settled down to do our interview. Just before the cameras rolled, he said: "I hope you're not expecting me to not like this. Because I do." It seemed the Glastonbury spirit had found its way into the heart of Boris Johnson. That shows how powerful it is - damn sure it wouldn't have happened at Reading.

Boris Johnson, Conservative MP and editor of The Spectator magazine

Billy and I had a lovely time. While what Glastonbury most resembles is a Napoleonic battlefield - a great mass of people, moving slowly through the mud, groaning - it rapidly became clear to me that it is also now completely pukka, an event of the season much like Ascot and Wimbledon. It was immensely pleasing to see so many people who had just been at Henley Royal Regatta pretending that they were getting on down in the dirt like smoke-haired hippies. Hippies don't say: "Oh dahling, hell-owh!"

There was lots of dope-smoking, of course, but I was more impressed by the capitalism of the place. Such vast amounts of tat being for sale at such exorbitant, marked-up prices makes Glastonbury a wonderful lesson in the benefits of the free market. For a theoretically anti-capitalist event, it struck me as being the height of entrepreneurship and kick-ass salesmanship. They were selling the most ludicrous things: tarot-card readings, alternative medicine, the chance to have your hands henna'd, your head henna'd, your pubic hair henna'd... it was the most gigantic festival of consumer credulousness.

Charlotte Hatherley, Guitarist with Ash

I've got pretty hazy memories of Glastonbury. I've never gone there and done the whole four-day camping thing - Ash have been twice and both times we just hung around for the night. But despite all that, it is the place I fell in love!

It happened in 2002 - we played the main stage, and after our set went to see Coldplay, who were amazing. I got quite emotional - I remember welling up when they played "The Scientist", though that could have been the mushrooms. Anyway, afterwards we all decided to go on a midnight ramble and that's when I met my boyfriend, Edgar [Wright, the director of Shaun of the Dead], in the middle of a field. I'm not really a festival person, but we should really go back to Glastonbury some time and celebrate our anniversary.

Howard Marks, Author and reformed drug smuggler; has been to every festival, bar two, since 1970

The first festival, back in 1970, was a very small affair - about 2,000 people went to Glastonbury Farm to see Al Stewart and the Kinks (though they pulled out in the end). I remember getting milk from the farm, watching a hay cart on fire, and avoiding the Hell's Angels, who were doing security.

What I don't remember is if there were any loos - I think we used the hedgerows. The loos are still the worst thing about it, though I stay in a caravan these days, which has its own facilities. I remember one year a chap turned up with a Winnebago that he'd converted into an extremely posh bathroom. For £20 you could have a shit, which was very popular.

The loos are a problem I can't ever see being solved. One year when I was performing - I think it was 1997 - I got a call from Michael Eavis, asking if I'd come up on the Pyramid stage to make an announcement. I was pretty off it after a day's, er, recreation, so I said yes, of course. I was taken along to the Pyramid stage where I met Michael's deputy, who told me I'd be going on stage straight after Jimmy Cliff finished his set. Apparently they had wanted Fatboy Slim to do the announcement, but he had lost his voice. Michael thought I had authority with the crowd, so they would listen to me instead. Naturally, I loved hearing that, and it wasn't until about two seconds before I went on that I thought to ask what exactly it was they wanted me to say.

"Well," said Michael's deputy, "we don't mind people shitting in the hedges. But when they piss in them, the urine seeps into the ground, runs downhill to the river, and kills the fish. Would you mind explaining this?"

So that was the day I had to follow the great Jimmy Cliff with the words: "Don't piss on the fish."

Howard Marks will be performing "Breakfast with Howard" on the Avalon Stage, Saturday morning

Mike Scott, Lead singer, The Waterboys; has played Glastonbury eight times

I will always remember my first Glastonbury, in 1984, with a lot of affection. It was my first rock festival, we were the first band to play the Pyramid Stage on the opening day, and it was thrilling. After the gig, while the rest of the band went back to London, myself and our drummer, Kevin, stuck around. We had no tent, no way of getting back, so we stayed up all night, roaming around the festival, and had a wonderful adventure. I loved how it was this transient town: even though it was only there for a few days, it had evolved into having main streets, and alleys. One area had one kind of atmosphere, another had a different kind of personality. I just fell in love. I loved all the funny little shops selling Tarot cards or all-day

breakfasts at five in the morning, and I loved watching the sun rise over the Tor.

From a performer's point of view there's something special about Glastonbury. It's something to do with the way it impacts on the crowd. Everyone who goes there gets touched by its sense of inclusiveness. It's not a genre festival, it's for everybody. In other words, Glastonbury unifies us. And while I've seen it grow very, very much larger over the years, I still feel that same freedom. Maybe it's not as cosy - but it's still great.

Glastonbury Festival 2004, from Fri to Sun 27 June (www.glastonburyfestivals.co.uk). All tickets are sold out. Additional reporting by Nisha Lilia Diu

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