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FESTIVAL REVIEW

Coachella, an Indie-Rock Festival With Room for Madonna

By [BEN RATLIFF](#)

Correction Appended

INDIO, Calif., May 1 — The concertgoers at the seventh annual Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, which filled a polo field here over the weekend with nearly 60,000 people a day, did not go to be one with the music and get dirty. Nor were they sad, suburban metal teenagers being treated like liabilities, roped and cordoned and overmanaged.

This was an indie-rock festival, 94 acts on five stages, and the operation was delicate: a sleek round of commerce for the taste-making class. Yet [Madonna](#) and Kanye West played here this year, and they encountered even more love than the alternative-rock groups that are at the heart of this festival. And for all the famous discernment of these taste makers, one didn't feel much palpable reaction among them.

Until the final acts — including the prog-rock band Tool, the moody electronic pop group Depeche Mode and the French dance-music duo Daft Punk — offered an appropriate moment to loosen up and shout in the dark a little, the participants gamely absorbed and contextualized.

This is not an audience that wears T-shirts of its favorite band or beer. Two hours east of Los Angeles, in the golf-resort desert lowlands, the festival started off six years ago with a crowd that knew what it was traveling there for. Now it has inevitably become larger and more mainstream, but the audience is still largely mid-20's, white, upper middle class, educated: prize ponies for advertisers, who must tread lightly around them.

Coachella crowds are leisure mavens used to exercising choice, and they favor small designers, like Junker and NaCo, rather than Nike logos or keepsakes from old rock concerts. But exercising prudent choice is not the same thing as declaring love. Coachella is not a rock festival for communal bliss: it can feel almost like a trade show, filled with informed and fairly dispassionate consumers sampling a band, checking it off a list, moving on.

Often this was a peculiarly tepid response to brilliant shows. Several bands, including the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, the Duke Spirit, Animal Collective, Cat Power and Deerhoof, gave it everything they had, each staging remarkable, potentially career-changing performances. The sense of informed caution was everywhere but onstage.

What is a Coachella band, then? A band that has just reconvened, for one thing, or wants to give a teaser

of a forthcoming tour. The original lineup of the Smiths was said to have been courted by the festival but turned down a \$5 million offer to reunite. Instead, on Sunday, Tool, a band that hasn't toured in four years, devoted about a quarter of its set to songs from its new album, "10000 Days," with a stage show involving enormous sound and enigmatic, ponderous bad-dream films on the giant video screens. (Its brooding, riff-heavy music upped the festival's low testosterone quotient.)

Madonna previewed her summer tour, which starts in earnest at the end of May, with a 45-minute set of mostly recent songs from "Confessions on a Dance Floor"; she had a Les Paul strapped to her body, a phalanx of dancers, and a live backing band to play letter-perfect late disco. Being a Madonna show, geared toward the visual language of fashion magazines, it was reified on delivery, full of blocked and posed freeze-frame moments. She gave some decent action, however, by cursing at someone in the front row for spilling water on her stage, and mopping the spill herself.

Madonna was in line with another characteristic of Coachella bands: she is a clinical analyst of music from the 1970's and 80's. The Magic Numbers, My Morning Jacket, Bloc Party, Eagles of Death Metal, the Zutons, the Duke Spirit: they all carry deep marks of music from a long time ago. Kanye West, in his Saturday afternoon show, was no different. After performing his hit "Gold Digger," with its old Ray Charles sample, he played old-school D.J., giving the crowd a snippet of Al Green's "Let's Stay Together," then [Michael Jackson's](#) "Rock With You."

"I'm going to play you one of my favorite songs," he then said. "I swear it's not a joke." It was "Take on Me," by Ah-Ha, one of the most fey radio hits of the 80's. Mr. West did a New Wave dance around the stage, looking as serious as he said he was, and the crowd — which may have been wondering what an emissary of true-blue pop culture was doing on its turf — appreciated the perfection of the counterintuitive cheesiness.

Mr. West used a string section to boost his live sound, and he wasn't alone. Sigur Ros used strings and brass in its dusk-hour set of rock songs fit for cathedrals, hovering for long stretches in the middle ground between crescendo and decrescendo. Gnarlz Barkley, a new collaboration between the singer Cee-Lo and the producer Danger Mouse that treads the line between misfit indie-rock and freaky R&B, used samplers, a band and backup singers, with everyone dressed as a character from "The Wizard of Oz." And Chan Marshall performed songs from the new Cat Power album, "The Greatest," with a slick band full of Memphis studio musicians.

For a singer who has conditioned her audiences to shaggy, discontinuous rambling, this was a glaring act of professionalism. Ms. Marshall warmed to the role, pulling her hair back from her face, smiling, keeping the show brisk. At the set's middle, she went back to her strange old ways for a minute: she gave the band a break, sang with a cracking voice and some rudimentary guitar chords, and covered her face with her hair.

Animal Collective played a set of well-practiced, neatly arranged freaking out, using electronic sound samples, processed guitar and lots of wild, elastic, almost ecstatic singing: working under the afternoon's

dry heat, the band seemed to be expelling demons and worked against the coziness and knowingness of the crowd, the I'll-blog-about-you-blogging-about-me energy. And Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs won the prize for most sincere response, looking genuinely moved and energized by the sight of a crowd that she said was the biggest she had ever played to.

Moving her long limbs slowly and imposingly, giggling and crooning and screaming maniacally, she was trying to feel something, and finally made the crowd feel something too. In the ballad "Maps," when she carefully sang the line "They don't love you like I love you," many women in the crowd turned to the men they were with and mouthed the lyric, making it theirs.

Correction: May 3, 2006

A picture caption in The Arts yesterday about the opening of the summer concert season misstated the surname of a member of the group Franz Ferdinand, which performed at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, Calif. He was Alex Kapranos, not Kaprano.

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