

The North Byron Parklands were crackling with energy. The sun carved through clouds, offering a brief but welcome shower on the similarly buzzing crowds, descending with surprising coordination into the endless green fields.

Up in the hills among the huge circus tents, a sound check is going on, the low rumbling mixing with the excited sounds of the audience, barking and cheering. Our neighbours filled every stereotype – loud shirt-rocking and loud shit-talking packs of The Boys, pseudo-hippies, girls in unique eye-catching outfits all managing to look vaguely similar, young groms fresh out of the HSC keen to catch up on partying, middle-aged battlers wearing exact the same Pink Floyd shirt as the blazed teenager next to him. Essentially, it was a hat collection of the felt and bucket varieties.

I felt instantly at home – I met legends coming from as far north as Cairns and as far south as Melbourne, and an entire length of a continent couldn't stop the instant mateship of putting up tents at the same time as your neighbours. I saw connected tunnels of marques snaking through campsites as complete strangers banded their tents together with a sense of unity that I would never have imagined.

DAY 1

It was the turbulent tropical weather that kick-started it all. The first day was baking hot and the unprepared idiots being cooked in the sun *raises hand* had to make friends with neighbours in the shade. This scenario was being repeated over and over the park; groups of complete strangers forming unlikely crews, sharing drinks, ciggies, clothing and everything between joined together to party in the heat.

Then on top of all this, the music. Just when I thought I was getting out of the heat in the colossal tent that is the Forest Stage, out come DZ Deathrays. Shred For Summer starts rocking and we enter a new level of sweat and grit. Charging through older classics like The Mess Up and Cops Capacity the crowd inside the huge tent – so eager to knock the dust off after long drives and tent shambles – moshed with gusto. Everyone knows that the party is just beginning, and what a way to kick it off. They rounded it off with Gina Works At Hearts, shredding and sweating as heads banged to outstanding double-guitar-octave-pedal action.

Then it was on to Confidence Man in the Valley Stage; the huge natural grass-hilled amphitheatre that Falls and Splendour have become famous for. Though I had questions about the black-veiled drummer and synth player (and their musical necessity for the gig), those questions are caught in my mouth as the dancing, pristine pop sensation that is Confidence Man sassed us from the stage. Bubblegum and Boyfriend (Repeat) went off. Outfit changes, champagne, aggressively suggestive dance moves had the crowd cheering approval and the party was off.

Daryl Braithwaite had young partyers and old battlers arm in arm roaring out the all-Aussie anthems. It turns out that One Summer is still performed incredibly, with Braithwaite's voice only

getting better with age, but the main event was, of course, Horses; packed with thousands of men and women, young and old cheering the anthem into the sky, sending shivers down my spine. Definitely not a one trick pony despite the equestrian theme.

Next up was The Jungle Giants, crisp, clean pop-rock dramatically growing into huge rock stadium sounds – ‘giants’ is the right word. On Your Way Down had a sea of people jumping in great waves, the vibe was ecstatic. Watching Used To Be In Love was a surreal experience as the crowd below turned it into a tsunami and the earth shook with thousands of jumping feet and blasting rock.

Things really started cooking for Foster The People. The eyes were wide and jaws were clenched as the mass of humanity put their dancing skills to the test. They’re one of those bands that you forget how many of their songs that you know. Of course Pumped Up Kicks had a thick wall of people on shoulders to experience the moment properly, but their new tracks of their new album, Sacred Hearts Club, like Pay The Man had the crowd dancing and sweating furiously to keep up with an equally relentless Mark Foster.

To wrap off a year, who could be better than Sydney’s most favourite son, Harley Streten. It was a beautiful, cubed, mirrored and at times very dark live show and set, the crowd reaching a frothing frenzy as the new year ticked over. The entirety of those still sober enough to move got down hard to Flume’s remixes of Major Lazer’s Get Free and Lorde’s Tennis Courts before he hypnotized the crowd with Never Be Like You and Insane. What a perfect way to ring in the new year – the ringing in your ears and a stagger back to a tent after an incredible day of tunes. But the best was yet to come.

DAY 2

Falls Festival the morning of January 1 was nothing short of hilarious – imagine the dustiest people of all time rubbing their eyes to the new year, looking to their left and seeing one neighbour literally keeled over backwards passed out on an esky, looking right and seeing another group still nodding along wide-eyed to psytrance from their phones. Again, it was stinking hot – the road turned to dust to match the hungover hundreds. Shellshocked from the previous night or still kicking on, these were the strugglers who turned out of their tents on the first stale Monday of the year.

WAAX started off the day, breaking strings and sweating as much as the audience – turns out they spent their new years at a truck stop on their way to Falls and they were as rough as the rest of us. Raw and heartfelt, they were just as stoked for us to be there as we were them.

Alex Lahey followed and damn did she know the crowd. Alex talked about her unused arts degree to the delight of the audience before shredding her way into a cover of Torn – the crowd really starting to battle the heat and steam up the tent. I stayed around the tent thinking that Luca Brasi were about to play. I was super keen to hear the Tasmanian devils, but due to a scheduling change last minute, Alice Ivy was there in their place. Far from disappointing, Alice

whipped out a funky and intense live show that turned the confused Brasi fans from leaving. Though the crowd was a mixed one the reception was nothing short of brilliant – hard rock fans getting down to the irresistible synth-trap stylings of Somebody Get Me A Drink, got the whole slightly confused but appreciative crowd bouncing.

The real story of the day was Dune Rats, not that I expected anything less from the red-eyed rascals, but this gig was something different. All day the heat had been rising and rising – the crowd was growing restless, hot and sticky, with one of the biggest hangovers on the calendar to boot. Dunies' show came with a warning about an imminent storm, and they were not kidding; the sun was finally blocked out and replaced with a bombardment of water. Everyone who stayed was drenched to the bone and thousands of die-hard fans embraced the crazy conditions. You could feel the tension snap like a rope – every song they played the pit got larger and muddier, the hits got more violent and crazy. I saw a huge muscle-bound guy tackle someone into the gravel before getting up and realizing that he had smashed a woman half his size into the dirt. Tempers from the night before spewed into the mosh with vendettas on a level I have never seen before.

All while this is going, BC Michaels is suddenly moshing in the mud, as their bassist Brett Jansch moves to the drums a random punter gets dragged on to play the now-free bass, before the ritualistic shoey. But the most incredible thing happened on the hill above – people racing down the slope to get to the songs were creating a huge mudslide. Hundreds of people were racing up this massive bowl to throw themselves down, completely doused in mud, flying down the hill on their stomachs like penguins. Things reached a fever pitch for Dalai Lama, Big Banana, Marijuana – mud was flying, blood was flowing and Falls reached yet another thrilling peak.

Glass Animals was directly after and though dryer, the crazy remained. By this stage, the cops had turned up to cordon off the community mudslide, but you can take the kids out of the mud but you cant take the mud out of the kids. I saw a man in the pit next to me take off his shoes one at a time to empty a pint of mud out of each, before solemnly redonning the sodden footwear. Hats off to you, my friend.

I was so damn keen for banging tracks trapping out with Run The Jewels, but EI-P kept banging on about mortality and dead relatives in-between tracks. By now the New Years hangover was in full effect – the crowd, so keen initially, now started dropping in droves. It got so bad that something incredible happened – RTJ left the stage but didn't put the house lights on, waiting for the crowd to cheer for an encore, which never came. Instead, the set awkwardly tapered off on two slower songs and abruptly end. All throughout the campsites around dodgy folding tables, the story was the same – what the hell happened at RTJ? Compared to the night before, the tents were silent going into the early morning as the population of the parklands readied itself for one almighty rallying effort for the day to come.

DAY 3

Surely things couldn't get more filthy than Dune Rats in the rain, but mother nature doesn't care for our plans and it bucketed down the whole day, letting the inhabitants know who put up a tent and who put up a pool. This turned the festival into not only a muddy swamp but an incredible game of 'Stay Wet Or Stay Dry', some punters running around like mushrooms in ponchos, while the other half took their clothes off, abandoned their shoes and let the heat of their partying sustain them through hot and cold.

It was raining for West Thebarton as the seven-piece rocked the Galaxy stage. It seemed strangely homely as puddles of mud mingled with the hay bales strewn through the tent, an almost farmyard feel and smell as the young and munted stumbled and slid around.

By the time Bad//Dreems took the same stage, the puddles had turned to pools and a moat of mud surrounded the tent. The rain poured down and the partyers poured in, replacing the wet outside with the sweat inside.

Total Giovanni, an absolute favourite of mine, was in the same venue – somehow turning it into a '90s-esque disco. My feet had been long soaked – I abandoned dry feet on the second day – but by this time punters and munters had lost and found new gear; everyone was dressed either in strange garments or a strange lack of them. Barefoot and wellington boots bumped in the earth all the way into I Just Can't Control My Love before looking at the nearest available watch and realizing that it was already time to head to Smith Street Band, people slipping and sliding up and down paths to get to the Valley.

By the time Vince Staples took to the Forest stage, the festival took another turn. People were full on rolling around in the mud, taking it upon themselves to fall down hills and one particularly partied individual I found in the process of trying to reattach a broken branch to a tree (it's where the branch lived, apparently). But nothing beats the lunatic who took it upon himself to climb into the air on a previously unclimbable pylon, bringing the show to a pause before he abruptly Spider Man-ed down the pylon, presumably to mates' or cops' welcoming arms. Safety first people, don't try this.

Outrageous partying in the mud and rain was the theme, and Peking Duk wasted no time in whipping thousands into a wave of arms that genuinely looked like an optical illusion. It was a bit of a wig out for some, but either way I ended up at Anna Lunoe's show – the smaller crowd so much friendlier than the intense swaying throng at the Duk.

I thought that The Kooks would be fun, but never really gave them much thought. Turns out that 15-year-old me knew all their songs, which came in handy with the simply epic crowd sing-alongs for Seaside, Always Where I Need To Be and Naive. All around young men and women relived their childhoods and emptied their lungs together. And by the end of their set, wouldn't you know it, the bloody rain stopped.

Intentionally or not, Falls was an emotional ride. It was oddly spiritual – the comradery, the

sing-alongs, the incredibly psychedelically-minded patrons or something else entirely. Either way, I'll be back. With gumboots.