

TUESDAY, MAY 2, 2006

IRISH TIMES

Kilkenny Rhythm and Roots Festival

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"Anyone for another foot stomper?" This question was asked more than several times during the ninth Carlsberg Rhythm and Roots Festival; indeed, it became the mantra for the weekend, as most pub venues on Kilkenny's main drag (and quite a few off it) throbbed to the sound of strummed guitars, plucked banjos, scorched vocals, scraped drums, scratched surfaces and - yes, but of course - stomping feet.

The event swung into its stride on Friday with the likes of the Deadstring Brothers, Elliott Brood, and Gina Villalobos. By Saturday it was Full Country Jacket territory: the aforementioned Elliott Brood and Gina Villalobos proved worthy of their respective reputations; Elliott Brood are white-shirt/black-tie boys from Canada, and are adept at creating moods, shapes, shades

and all manner of untoward but welcoming alt.country angles. They term their music "Death Country", which is, perhaps, more an awkward branding than the truth, but it nonetheless gives a flavour of the type of serious soul shaking music they play. New Orleans based band Grayson Capps provide light relief with their tight mix of Lynyrd Skynyrd guitar-swirling rock and downhome roots; it's clearly derivative but it's also as sincere and honest as it is gritty and wholesome.

Just as sincere, but far more fragrant, is Gina Villalobos. Each year at this festival there is at least one act you know won't make a return visit because the increase in their popularity dictates that any subsequent fee will be too much for the event's relatively modest budget.

Such an act is Villalobos, whose crossover potential (like erstwhile festival acts Ryan Adams and Kathleen Edwards) is immense. Her naturally bronchial voice guides acoustic/electric Americana material to a highly satisfying conclusion; her songs of painful memories, emotional loss and a rootless lifestyle yearning for some kind of romantic structure are simply fabulous. Imagine a dirtier, grittier, rougher'n'tougher Sheryl Crow and you'll have some idea of the potential and promise involved.

If Villalobos was the heretofore unknown quantity

made good, then the festival's undisputed headliner - Alejandro Escovedo - was the known quantity made even better. A major health scare (followed by a lengthy recuperation period) prevented Escovedo from appearing at this festival three years ago, but it was clear from the outset that he was eager to make up for lost time.

Joined on stage by a guitarist, a violinist and two viola players, Escovedo concentrated on playing songs from his forthcoming album, *The Boxing Mirror*. The influence of the record's producer - former Velvet Underground member, John Cale - was such that for most of the time the music sounded like VU raised in the *barrios* of Mexico rather than the bars of Manhattan. This was a very good thing, as the instrumentation veered between tempestuous and bucolic, mellow and quite unhinged.

Escovedo seemed at ease with each, his apparent willingness to go with (indeed, direct) the flow a testament to his unswerving, uncluttered sense of originality and vision.

Indeed, Escovedo's novel approach mirrored the aesthetic of the festival, which next year celebrates its 10th anniversary. You are hereby advised to wear in your foot stompin' boots in time for it.