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# Travelling to **WOMADelaide**

*Grazyna Zajdow*

## The transformative power of music was palpable at this year's WOMADelaide

I am doing my yearly road trip with my friend Carole. As we have done for the last three years, we drive to Adelaide on Friday and return on Monday. In between we listen and dance to music, and occasionally see some street theatre or art. We feast on what is called WOMADelaide, that music festival begun in England in 1982 by Peter Gabriel. It could be the cynical middle-aged critic's bonanza of bile—but isn't. Instead it has become the memory which sustains me for first the few weeks of the year's classes and lectures, and reminds me of the power of music.

This year, the festival is huge. There are seven stages, ranging from the main one that can accommodate an audience of perhaps 30,000 to much smaller, more intimate spaces. Everything runs like clockwork, a feat that fascinates the former stage manager in me. What sort of discussions must take place to convince artists and musicians to stop on time, even when the audience is screaming for more? Is it coercion, or is it part of the same phenomenon happening in front of the stages and throughout the park? This phenomenon means hundreds of queuing people are pleasant to each other first thing in the morning in front of the Combi Coffee stand. It allows people to drink alcohol from midday to midnight and not become aggressive. And it enables the premier of the state, in the middle of an election, to walk around without the press following, and without any particular interest from the rest of the crowd. They are there to enjoy life, after all. Musicians walk around too and listen to music—they become part of the world in which we exist as audience and participants. A pair of Dutch performers dressed as workmen walk through the crowd carrying a piece of metal fence. They plop it down and then start ordering people around. We all do as we are told, happily, goodnaturedly, bemusedly. Everyone just seems to get into the spirit of the thing.

'Why does it work?' I wonder. I put it down to the music, from the quiet and contemplative (of which I sometimes partake), to the raucous (of which I partake a little too much for my ageing back). This year I watch an English musician playing with Cretan musicians on traditional Cretan instruments. They have little stage presence but remarkable abilities that force us to listen and enjoy. Then there are the Japanese taiko drummers (who have stage-presence galore), Hungarian gypsies, Spanish gypsies, singers from the Western Sahara, Afrobeat musicians from Melbourne—lots of musicians from Melbourne, really. There's a band who

play a mix of Turkish, gypsy and hip-hop, and another playing Russian prison songs (with a couple of Polish songs in there too). There are young musicians from Byron Bay playing reggae as if they had only just discovered it, but also a band from Jamaica who really did invent ska almost fifty years ago.

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On the Sunday afternoon, while watching the Afrobeat band, I look at the audience. What strikes me is the lack of a generational divide. People in their sixties dance alongside people in their twenties. No one is too cool for school, and no one notices that they might be dancing next to their parents. I have seen one man here for a number of years. He comes in his board shorts and sensible shoes; some years he has worn a very large sun hat, kept in place by the string under his chin. He doesn't seem to understand a simple four/four beat, but that doesn't stop him. He just dances, as do the young girls who spend their time in front of mirrors practising their moves before they get out in public. On Saturday evening we watch a classic Cuban salsa concert and I dance my practised salsa moves alongside another woman who looks my age but could make me swoon with the way she moves her hips.



Spanish gypsy band Ojos de Brujo

Away from the stages acrobats fly through the air. During a storm, a French troupe is hoisted upon a huge crane; dressed as little drummers they become a human mobile hundreds of metres above us. Children have their own little area that produces a parade on Sunday afternoon, and parents are seen walking with their children too young to be left to wander—of whom there are many. How different is this place to quotidian life in Melbourne where parents don't let children out of their sights for reasons best known to them. Toddlers do get lost here, but they are quickly found as well. Young fathers carry babies all day and way into the night. Even the young men who are caught jumping the fence are quietly walked away by the security guards without aggro (but then I am probably too blissed out to notice it in any case). The police walk through but they seem to have very little to do. They seem oblivious to the smell of dope smoke that moves through the crowd every once in a while.

The more I write this the less I believe it, but it is true. Everywhere are massive rubbish bins divided into compostable, recyclable and other refuse. I don't know if the festival is as it claims, carbon-neutral, but it may even come close. There are stalls that sell the products of Indigenous women from the Andes and short people from Southern Africa. An artist from England works with Indigenous women from South Australia, who produce the beautiful and large flags around the area. For those three days it seems like it is possible to live without static in this world, and move closely surrounded by thousands of others without feeling put-upon.

We drive back knowing that the hail-storm that hit Melbourne

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over the weekend could have damaged our houses, but that does not dampen our feelings. My iPod will be fattened by ten discs of new music, which we listened to on our trip back. I realise that I have taken a holiday away from the anxiety of global warming, demanding students, even more demanding university management and the coming football season. But this experience reminds me of the transformative potential of music and the human desire to live and enjoy the world of music, art and dance. **a**

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