



As an idea it was interesting enough: to pick two music festivals and write only about getting to them, leaving the virtues of the actual events to the hacks who ride these things from year to year like fleas on a tiger. The trouble lay with my motivations. It was not my intention to go out and fetch some Whitmanian psalm to freedom and the open road. I had simply looked at the half year to come and seen little beyond the white light of my computer screen in the gloom of my study. Wouldn't it be clever, I thought, to plant islands of respite in the calendar, and make a little money on the side? I should have known that the journey undertaken lightly is the one that drifts by the gates of hell.

First up, in August, was Opiikoppi, the legendary Lovveld skop near Northam on the borderline of North West and Limpopo. When the festival was founded back in the mid-'90s, the organisers searched their souls for a theme and came up with Festival of Rock. The next year it was Festival of Rock 2, and if they had stayed on that righteous path the 2015 iteration would have been Festival of Rock 21. But of course the branding people took the tiller at some point and all subsequent Opiikoppi posters have been sub-headed with a line of crystalline nonsense: *Hond Uit 'n Bos* (2003), *The Way of the Dassie* (2007), and so on, working up to 2015's theme, *The Fantastic Mr VosVos*. It bothered me in the way that in-house jokes are bothersome, and I con-

fessed as much to a dissolute and omniscient friend.

"Oh, haven't you met Vos?" he said, startled that this should be so. "He runs the booze through Opiikoppi, has for years. He's fantastic."

Fine, if things were going to be as loosely relational as that I'd play the game. I called the only Fox-by-name I've ever met: Sannie Fox, the actress/musician with a voice that smokes blue at the edges. I asked her how the cool kids travel to Opiikoppi. "There was a special train running up from Cape Town for a few years. You can imagine how that turned out," she said.

VosVos, the train! My romantic imagination conjured Janis Joplin look-alikes jamming drunkenly in the dining car, and entire carriages given over to free love. The Opiikoppi Express had been indefinitely suspended but I booked a train ticket anyway, confident that some organic version of the same would be pulling out of Cape Town railway station on the Wednesday before the big weekend. To establish my advantage I arrived very early and composed myself by the window in my four-person sleeper cabin. The man who entered after me was in his late 60s, his skin the colour of vellum. He smiled and said his name was Sorzen.

"That's a great name for a character in a book," I said, to which he replied that he had recently written one, only to destroy it when the publisher he approached insisted he type the thing out. "The material is dangerous, you see. The only safe storage is up here," he said, tapping

**My imagination conjured entire carriages given over to free love**

erans side and a men's senior squad, both on their way to nationals in Potchefstroom, and at 10am well into the capacious coolers they'd dragged aboard. I have a deep-seated fear of hockey players, with their white Oakleys and their little bums, and I fled to the dining car and stayed there for the next eight hours. People drifted in, ordered *pap* and *nyama*, and left, and not one of them had those festival eyes. In the late afternoon a likely young couple sat quietly down in an adjacent booth: she with long blonde hair held down with a plait-

ed circlet, he a hip-swinging *plateland* boykie with chiselled features and a talker's Adam's Apple. Yes, they said, they were bound for "Opi" — their third. I pounced, and we were soon swigging Black Label and rehearsing borrowed conversations about Ibiza, and the psychiatric benefits of the Ayahuasca high.

The beer cans multiplied as the sun set over a crenulated Karoo landscape, and for a moment I felt that delicious sense of truancy which festivals exist to provide. The rest of the train had been busy, though, establishing what I suppose I have long known: that in matters of debauchery even the most blooded festivalgoer has nothing on the average South African train passenger. At the naughty end of the dining car an alcoholic head-to-head had kicked off between a police fishing team from Saldanha Bay and a group of seasonal grape pickers. Female hockey players — many of them practically grandmothers — were tearing up and down in cow-print onesies, and at least two of them had straddled men half their age.

I returned briefly to my cabin and found the floor awash with sour-smelling libations to the dearly departed. The former soldier was resting his eyes in a seated position, mumbling something about a missing bottle of water. It was near freezing and Sorzen, who was lying down, had ripped the floor mat up for a blanket. The thing sat atop his body like a Tupperware lid on a potato. I asked him if he was OK. "No," he said, in a small voice.

Back in the corridor I watched with foreboding as a train security guard entered the carriage from the far end. Between us a mass of hockey players stampeded in and out of at least three cabins, according to the drift and curve of the railway lines. One second the passage was open, and the next it would be absolutely stuffed with drunkards. The guard studied the gauntlet for a few minutes before darting forward, just as a particularly forceful wave of bums came rushing out: six, seven, eight of them, and they continued to arrive in numbers, pushing the poor man tightly up against the carriage windows, until it seemed he might shoot upwards, like a pressurised conger eel. Throughout this ordeal he never once stopped smiling, as if this was the least of it.

When the Shosholozza Meyl pulled into Johannesburg, eight hours late, I exchanged numbers with the festival couple and we said we'd catch up at the event. I knew it was goodbye, though. The train had not allowed us to believe in each other, somehow. It had exposed just how minor were our parts in the national drama, how minute our plans.

THE question of how to travel to Rocking the Daisies near Darling in the Western Cape required altogether less thought. Some years ago the organisers recognised the joy many take in the incidental stuff of festivals, and created a product for them: a 50km walk to the event split over two days, much



of it on the beaches of Table Bay and at time when the coastal flowers are out in strength. "Walking the Daisies", as the annual pilgrimage is now called, was designed to fit neatly with the festival's green image, and as such walkers participate in litter drives and tree-planting initiatives along the way.

I signed up but forgot to diarise the dates and duly missed the start, by a whole day. "That's it," I yelled at my wife, "I'm canning the whole thing."

"Nothing's stopping you from walking there on your own," she calmly suggested. "You know how you are with big groups anyway."

She was right, I had been dreading it. Not the people, exactly, although photographic evidence of hula-hooping from the previous year's walk had caused me some worry. It had more to do with a personal foible: my inability to tolerate the wheeze and rumble of strangers' snoring in conjunction with the souping of waves. This specific combination of sounds works on my nerves like a sophisticated vibro-acoustic weapon, and I have fled more beach-side structures in the middle of the night than I care to count.

It was thus with a light heart that I set out from Cape Town the next day, alone. I would not do any good, I would just do, and I would do in one day, not two. But somewhere between Table View and Melkbosstrand I began to regret the absence of company. The beaches were as uneventful as they were beautiful, and a feeling of inconsequentiality built as Koeberg nu-

clear power station rose from the sea haze in the distance like some dread toad. Rather than look at it I studied my feet, and that's when I noticed the rubbery sphere among the kelp, entirely covered in flies.

"It was probably a fat ball," said H, an academic friend who had agreed to join me for the Koeberg Nature Reserve portion of the walk.

"They're a product of the oil and fat that washes into the sewerage system from coastal restaurants, hotels and B&Bs. After travelling out to sea in the outflow pipes the lipids bind together and get rolled into spherical shapes by the currents on the ocean floor."

"That a fact?"

"Yep, that's almost certainly what you found, although there's a tiny chance it might have been an abnegris, which is a waxy substance produced by the bile ducts of sperm whales."

These rare and stinky expectations, said the academic, are

**We agreed strangers were worth risking friendliness on once in a while**



prized by perfume-makers for their fixative properties. There was a chance, therefore, that I had missed out on a windfall of several hundred thousand rands.

We reached the line of Eskom warning signs planted in the beach sand, and tacked inland to the nuclear facility's entrance boom. Two burly security guards stepped out of the guardhouse to block the way.

"The hiking trails are closed," said the one, who was called Manuel.

"But I called ahead," I spluttered, "I was told they would be open."

"They are closed," he repeated, and handed me a flyer which ex-

plained that the nature reserve enclosing the reactors would be closed from 6pm while sensitive work was being performed. The time had been crossed out with a pen and amended to 6am. I bemoaned the inconvenience while the academic pissed in the fynbos at the side of the road. Manuel maintained his sympathetic composure, and gently suggested I had probably misunderstood the operator I had spoken with, because the work had been scheduled. I should have let it rest but I kept on, and eventually the apparatchik lost his composure.

"Sir, we reserve the right to shut this facility down without a minute's notice and we don't have to tell you or anyone else," he barked.

"No Manuel override?" the academic crowed over his shoulder, zipping up his fly.

"What did you tell them when you called?" he said, as we portaged around the reserve in his car. "That you were walking a long way to a music festival on your own, and could they therefore please suspend the strictures of the National Key Points Act to allow you to hug the curve of Table Bay?"

"Something like that."

He dropped me on the R27 at the turn for Mamre.

"Most pointless thing I've ever done," he said, and drove back to Cape Town.

I started running again, cutting directly inland through Port Jackson thickets in which herds of Damara sheep nibbled on thorns. I saw a snake on the road and

screamed at it. After an hour of this a bakkie pulled over.

"Are you a daisy?" said the silver-whiskered driver, introducing himself as Leon.

"Lilian," he said to his passenger, "gee Daisy 'n branne, hy's dors."

I rode into Mamre sipping a restorative brandy and Coke, while Leon explained about the "three Bs" of emergency first aid on the West Coast's notoriously treacherous roads: "First you check the person's bag, then their back pocket, then the boot," he said, his merriment so infectious I accepted a second "Ricky Lowe" (Richlieu), and then a third. We passed the old mission station, beautiful in its riverine park of oaks, and climbed a dirt track to a lay-bye from where it was possible to see the festival site in the valley below, rapidly filling with tents and cars.

I confessed my regret at not having planted any trees and Leon fished some greeny-grey pips from the car's ashtray. I solemnly forked them into the ground and together we watered them with melt water from an Igloo ice bag. Against all odds the academic whizzed past in his little car, having decided on a whim to give the festival a try. He reversed, pulled up a crate and we sat around smoking and drinking and agreeing that strangers were worth risking friendliness on once in a while. As the sun dipped into the coastal hills the strains of EDM pulsed up from the valley floor.

"Sounds like an extractor fan," said Leon, giving us a pitying look. "At least you can be sure it's all downhill from here." **LS**