

NZ festivals leading the way post-COVID

Kerry Sunderland

According to the *NZ Pocket Guide*, the number one thing you should never say to a Kiwi is 'Australia invented the pavlova'. When I moved here from Byron Bay at the end of 2012, I was amazed to discover a large number of actors, artists and musicians who I thought were Australian were actually born in New Zealand. More than eight years later, I've apparently acclimatised as a resident, since I found myself feeling a bit sensitive when it was reported in last week's *Echo* that Bluesfest – with a post-covid capacity of 16,500 per day – was to have 'been the first major festival to occur in Australia and possibly the world since the summer of 2019/20.'

Sorry, not sorry. Your trans-Tasman neighbour had already beaten you to the start gate.

'How lucky are we?' and 'Where in the world is lucky enough to do this?' are two questions that get asked a lot these days in Aotearoa. There's rarely a trace of smugness in these questions, but bucket loads of gratitude.

On April 1, CubaDupa organisers posed the second question on social media, when they posted their 2021 wrap video. The country's largest street carnival took place in Wellington on the final weekend of March, a whole week before Bluesfest would have happened – had it gone ahead.

But CubaDupa, which attracted 120,000 on the first day alone, wasn't the first major festival in New Zealand. Leading up to New Year, Rhythm & Vines attracted 30,000 punters in the North Island, while Rhythm & Alps attracted 24,000 in the South Island.

Rhythm & Alps founder and director Alex Turnbull defines a festival as a multi-day event. It's not, he says, 'an afternoon in a park with a fence around it'.

So, by this figuring, two Bay Dreams events (on the North Island in Mount Maunganui on 3 Jan and on the South Island in Nelson on 5 Jan) don't qualify. But with more than 30 acts attracting 20,000 punters at 'The Mount' and 13,000 in Nelson, the organisers probably beg to differ. Bay Dreams also earns the accolade of being the only music festival in NZ last summer to feature



Damara Sylvester and her partner, Che Vincent, at CubaDupa 2021.

overseas performers, with 11 international acts prepared to fly in early and spend two weeks in managed isolation.

Turnbull and his team announced the Rhythm & Alps programme – which for the first time exclusively featured homegrown talent – in August last year, not long after Auckland had gone back into its second lockdown and the rest of the country moved back to Alert Level 2, which prohibited gatherings of more than 100 people.

Turnbull says they chose a stress-free path 'knowing that we couldn't rely on borders being open and we fully embraced the idea that we might have to cancel.'

In contrast, WOMAD organisers decided at the end of last year to cancel the 2021 festival scheduled to take place in New Plymouth last month.

Turnbull attributes the ability to go ahead with Rhythm & Alps, which included 7,000 who camped on site – to both good luck and good management.

He says Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and the Ministry of Health need to be commended on their decision to 'go hard and go early', which has resulted in one of the lowest rates of community COVID-19 transmission in the world. But he also believes COVID-19 encouraged the Rhythm & Alps team to 'up their game'.

'Rhythm & Alps has been running for 10 years and, while we've been focused on continual improvement, the pandemic really encouraged us to step up our health and safety compliance. We had to pull our socks up. We thought, let's set an example. Fortunately, our demographic [18 to 30-years]

have been really receptive [to the new requirements].'

By the beginning of this year, CubaDupa organisers were already battle hardened. Last year, CubaDupa, which was due to be held on the first weekend NZ went into lockdown, was cancelled. In 2019, organisers made the call to move it indoors, away from its natural habitat, as a result of security concerns following the Christchurch mosque attacks. So, in many ways, this year's CubaDupa was two years in the making. The festival, which is famous for blurring the lines between performers and audience, was welcomed wholeheartedly by both Wellingtonians and visitors from around the country.

InsideOut Circus founder and artistic director, Damara Sylvester, and her partner Che Vincent, flew up from Nelson with two other friends to enjoy the festival. They booked extra baggage to fit in their elaborate outfits, enough for two costume changes per day.

'There was a really good vibe,' Damara says, 'with no drunks but lots of jolly people. There was a great atmosphere at the main stage, where hip hop artist Jess B knocked my socks off. Loads of people stopped and asked if they could take photos of us. It was the biggest crowd I've been in since pre-covid. It was standing room only, intimate and in your face; we were all dancing and sharing breath.'

While movement wasn't restricted, there were QR codes everywhere. It was, she says, kind of weird to have to wear a mask when they got back on the plane to fly home.

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