



Summerfest Diary

by Nick Holle

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Milwaukee's aptly named annual eleven-day summer festival, Summerfest, also goes by the moniker "World's Largest Music Festival." It is never clarified what is so large about it. Its length perhaps? Its patrons? Its sheer disregard for acceptable human behavior?

I couldn't stand the suspense, so I headed for Milwaukee from June 30th to July 10th to find out. And to listen to some live music, baby. You can never go wrong with live music...I'm pretty sure.

Thursday, July 30th

1:00 pm: I arrive in downtown Milwaukee. I have to be there by two to get in free with my Big Gig Value Card, which I paid five bucks for, so I guess it's not entirely free. My budget for Festival expenditures is \$100. Knock off the five for the card and \$30 for weekend tickets (when the card isn't good). Watch, folks, because I'm gonna show you how to save some money.

1:15 pm: I park for free at a street meter with my temporary handicap placard. I mean, thank god I ruptured my Achilles tendon last fall. The placard is going to save me big time in parking fees. A staph infection, three surgeries, and eight months of crutches was totally worth it.

1:30 pm: I walk into the festival grounds. Whoa, look at all the people and the stages and the rides and the advertising stands...and what do you know, I'm already bored. Doobie Brothers don't go on until nine. I find a spot in the shade to read a book. Tom Perrotta's *Bad Haircut*. Good book. Stories about childhood and high school. Funny. I give it five out of five tater tots. This is a rating systems devised with my friends, which resembles, in a lot of ways, the star rating system. But instead of using stars, we use tater tots. Fascinating.

5:00 pm I walk by one of the stages and hear a terrible Matchbox Twenty cover band. This requires no comment.

6:00 pm: Grab a gyro. Yummy. So long, eight dollars. Normally I'll eat before showing up at "The Fest" and then again after I leave. But on the days I'm there for twelve hours, I will be forced to spend eight dollars on half-assed gyros and the like.

9:00 pm: Doobie Brothers come on. They rock. The crowd eats it up. It says a lot when your music carries this much weight for over thirty years. The enjoyment is dampened a little when four assholes jump onto the picnic table I'm sitting at, a hundred yards away from the stage, presumably to get a better view. Assholes and morons. Doobies: Four out of five tater tots.

him out. 3 1/2 taters.

1:00 am: I retire to my place of residence for the next week and a half, the lovely apartment of my bestest and closest friend Linda. I get the first of several eye rolls from her about spending the next eleven days at "that hellhole." What is she talking about?

Friday, July 1st

1:00 pm: I arrive amongst a flurry of white festival-goers. As I beeline for the bathroom, I see three young black guys emptying the trash, a wonderful reminder of how far we've come since slavery. This will continue throughout the festival as the ninety-five percent white crowd gets drunker and more careless, and the blacks and Hispanics clean up their mess. I want to say something funny here, but all I can do is wonder why anyone would want to bomb this country.

1:15 pm: Today's book is Elmore Leonard's *Pronto*.

5:30 pm: Grab some Chinese food. It's terrible. They embarrassed Asia by making that plate. So long, eight dollars. My dinner is partially redeemed with a citing of just-drafted Milwaukee Bucks rookie Andrew Bogut. I overhear some drunk asshole say, "Aw, he's nothing. I could take him." The drunk trips over his feet almost immediately.

8:00 pm: I'm close, about three rows away, for tonight's concert. First is John Davis, formerly of the band Superdrag. I can't help myself by saying his show was a super drag. 1 1/2 taters.

10:00 pm: A show I was totally pumped for, Phantom Planet, is next. Great poppy rock music. Their lead singer, Alexander Greenwald, is a trip, prancing around the stage like Mick Jagger. Lots of fun. Sounded good. 4 taters.

Saturday, July 2nd

5:00 pm No free admission today, so I use the first leg of my three-day pass. I can go later in the day, so I don't have to spend money on food. It's best to fast anyway when you're going to see Daryl Hall and John Oates in concert. I don't know why. It just is.

6:00 pm A Nashville band, Will Hoge plays. The concert is great. Rollicking, energized rock and roll. I know instantly that this is the best non-headlining show of the entire festival. 4 1/2 taters.

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7:30 pm I finish my second book in three days. Pronto is a breezy and fun crime novel. Not Leonard's best, but middling Elmore Leonard is always good to me. 3 taters.

8:00 pm The Dirty Dozen Brass Band. This was a cool New Orleans jazz band, something I don't normally see live, following mostly rock and pop music. But it was a good time listening to their jams. I get stuck sitting next to two chain smokers, severely hindering my musical experience. It's a total tag-team effort: one lights up, blows smoke in my face, finishes, then the other lights up. Fucking gross. This will be a continuing theme throughout the week, as I curse silently at smokers and wish them early deaths. I realize only minutes later that I'm a terrible human being for wishing such a thing, and then the small voice retorts, "They're terrible human beings for smoking, especially near you." And this goes back and forth and back and forth until I get up and move and sit down next to a quiet couple bobbing their heads up and down. This is much better. And then the woman takes out her cigarette and lights it up. Dirty Dozen: 3 taters.

10:00 pm I'm ready for some fuckin' Hall & Oates! I normally wouldn't consider seeing Hall & Oates, not a big fan of 80's music, unless you're talking Graceland (the greatest album of all time). But my good friend Scott has actually paid money to go directly to a Hall & Oates show, and he seems to come dangerously close to orgasm when talking about it. So I'm going for his sake...and for the possibility of orgasm, of course.

I sit down about ten rows out and glance down the aisle. I notice a guy in a cowboy hat and chaps and imagine him singing along to "Maneater." Doesn't work. I call down to him and tell him he's at the wrong show. He turns to me, rather dumbfounded, and says, "Fuck you, Lash LaRue, I'm here to see Pat Green! Pat Motherfuckin' Greeeeeen!" A woman turns to me and gives me an apologetic nod, which at first I thought was just confirming what Cowboy Jim had said, but then I realize she feels bad for me because I was actually here to see Hall & Oates.

Sure as shit, Oates had a cold or something, and they nixed the show, replacing him with Pat Green, of course. I hightail it out of there before Cowboy Jim ropes me and ties my hooves together. I decide to catch a few songs from Los Lobos, but I could barely see. I switched to Dr. John's stage, but I just wasn't feeling it. Then I ended up back for Pat Green while he was covering The Boss. But then he said something about how awesome America is, and all I could think about was the drunkards' piss and puke that our faithful minority folk were cleaning up right then for \$5.15 an hour. I leave for the night.

11:30 pm Oates is a pussy. But as I was on my way out of the festival grounds, my night is salvaged by hearing the following coming directly out of a person's mouth: "Problem is, the best dance club in Milwaukee is the best gay club." Read that line just one more time. Yep.

Sunday, July 3rd

7:00 pm I show up later again today, using my second of the day passes. Tonight's shows, Michael Tolcher and Gavin DeGraw, I'm a little weary of. Though I'm a complete sucker for a piano player, DeGraw is played on Top 40 stations, which is all fine and wonderful for him. But I know it's going to bring in a social and cell-phone happy batch of youth who, for the most part, only superficially care about the music and are mostly there because everyone else is.

Why don't I just stay home, you ask? Because, silly, I have to find out if my stereotyping and prejudice holds true!

As soon as I rounded the corner to the stage, I realized that, yes, it does. And I immediately felt bad for Tolcher and DeGraw because they immediately lose one tater for their shows because they have more than the allotted number of ripening virgins in the crowd (that number being 4,500 by the way).

8:00 pm Not to worry, Tolcher gains his tater back by having an all-black band. This, I am sure, made the sanitation fleet feel a hell of a lot better.

Not to worry, he loses it again when he starts playing, encouraging the screaming sixteen-year-olds and being a little too overtly sexual, which kind of overshadowed his music on this night. Whether it was necessary for him to bring up one of those sixteen-year-olds to grind with on stage—well, it's probably not my place to make a judgment on that. I am going to dock him another tater though for singing, "It ain't no party like a Summerfest party 'cause a Summerfest party don't stop." That is completely unnecessary.

Then, in all seriousness, he brought out a man juggling fire and actually revved up the crowd by echoing Nelly (yes, I had to look that up): "It's gettin' hot in here, so take off all your clothes." Don't forget, there are more than 4,500 virgins in this crowd!

Well...I guess that earns him another tater back. I give the show three taters for sheer entertainment value. Then he was docked four, one for the virgins, one for grinding with the underager, one for the "ain't no party" line, and one for the "it's getting' hot" line. He earns two back for the black band and the encouragement of orgy. So if I have this right the concert gets 1 tater. And I will salute him for that.

10:00 pm Gavin DeGraw has to follow this up. He can't. Whenever he plays piano, he sounds good. Whenever he plays guitar, he's lame. I'll give him two and half taters, but he's docked one for the virgins, and he's docked one for not having enough songs to fill a headlining set and trying to show us he knows his roots by playing "Papa Was A Rolling Stone", "Proud Mary", and "Let's Get It On". Christ, where did he get the balls to take those kinds of chances on the stage?

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Monday, July 4th

6:00 pm Linda fights the urge to stay home in the peace and quiet and joins me to see a favorite of both of ours, Ben Folds. Now I guess I've only hinted at the monstrosity of alcohol consumption that goes on at Summerfest. I've never understood the concept of getting blasted at a concert. If you truly loved the music, wouldn't you want to be clear-headed and focused on it? Maybe that's just my stupid illogic talking. Anyway, the drinking and the crowds create an atmosphere that, on each day of the festival, is seemingly just below the threshold of total chaos, anarchy, and injury. All it would take is one pair of brass knuckles, and you'd be reading on Yahoo! News the next day about the 42 dead and 162 injured. Yet, almost always the only things that are hurt are heads (of drunkards from hangovers) and feelings (of people like me who'd prefer a concert without being surrounded by loud, obnoxious, inconsiderate smoking people, who are probably not like that in real life...only when they're drinking). Which is fortunate.

What I sometimes fail to consider is that Summerfest is not a concert. It's a social event. You're not sitting next to someone who paid half a day's work to see the show. You're sitting next to Rick from Sigma Phi Epsilon and his buddies Tits and Brinkman. And they're hear to see Ben Motherfuckin' Foooooooooolds!

Tits: Hey, Rick, how many beers have you had?

Rick: I've had thirteen, and it's not even six o'clock.

Tits: Lightweight.

Everyone bursts into uncontrollable laughter.

Linda and I show up four hours early to try to get good seats. We sit next to Rick, Tits, and Brinkman. And we regret it for four agonizing hours.

6:30 pm The leader of the 80's cover band The Sweet Tarts mistakenly refers to Ben Folds as soft rock. This gets a few "fuck you's" from the crowd, and I hope hard that the dink stays around for Ben's show. The Tarts are high energy, but the music stinks. Again I'm no 80's fan. I'll give them a tater and half, the half for feeling sorry that the guy thinks Ben Folds will play a nice pretty little soft rock set.

8:30 pm American Minor is the next band in our wait. Linda and I don't really pay attention. We just sit in awe as this nineteen-year-old and his trophy porn star tries to tell me we're sitting in the seats his friend was supposed to save for them. I give him my best what-the-fuck-are-you-talking-about-we-ain't-moving stare, and he melts, possibly even believing that I would kick his ass if he continued to pursue his claim. (I am a guy who is so aggressive that when I was inexplicably attacked playing basketball a year ago, I fought back by curling up into the fetal position and letting the guy rail on me.)

10:00 pm Ben finally comes on stage, and he is sensational. I'm a sucker for a piano man, and a piano man who gets up there and bangs the shit out of the keys and rollicks and throws his stool at his piano and swears and plays a quiet, sad cover of Dr. Dre's "Bitches Ain't Shit" is the stuff of legend as far as I'm concerned. I love it when you get to see your favorite musician play, and you've gone through his records so many times, you've needed multiple copies. And you know every song he plays and get all his jokes. And he rocks hard, WITH A PIANO! It makes for a glorious concert experience. So thanks, Ben and band. 5 taters.

Tuesday, July 5th

8:00 pm Sitting amongst a crowd of diehard Coheed & Cambria fans, I get to see another favorite band of mine, Stereophonics. They're a popular U.K. band and not extremely well-known here. Distinct vocals, kind of in the Rod Stewart vain, but they play excellent British rock music. I am one of five Stereophonics fans in the crowd and only one of five people who seem to enjoy the show. They play the first few songs like they have had four or five straight number one albums (which they have in Britain), then they play the rest of the set in a what-the-fuck-are-we-doing-here-and-why-are-we-opening-for-Coheed-&-Cambria daze on their faces. 3 taters.

9:30 Stereophonics finish in time for me to check out John Hiatt, the long-time country blues rocker. He has a lot of fun chatting with the crowd. A good show to see while Coheed & Cambria rocked the other side of the festival grounds. 3 1/2 taters.

Wednesday, July 6th

It's jam band day at The Fest, so I stay home for rest, relaxation, and salmon BLT's. Yummy.

Thursday, July 7th

12:00 pm I hit The Fest early today because I'm trying to get in to see Weezer and The Pixies for free. There are lots of free stages at the festival, but there are also pay concerts with separate tickets. Each day they give away free wristbands to sit on the lawn in the amphitheater where the pay shows are.

3:30 pm For twenty-six years I had Army-like buzzed hair and never got checked out by girls. Then I got bored, grew my hair out, and now—though not ridiculously often—I do get noticed. I only mention it now because I'm probably going to mention it again three or four times in the rest of piece, and I want you to know that my fascination with it is due to the lack of attention in the first quarter-century of my life.

Anyway, I'm reading my book, Dennis Lehane's *Mystic River*, and I notice to my left is a group of high-school-age girls laughing and being loud. Then I watch one of them—who is fairly attractive and dressed in a small, tight tank top and shorts that cover less surface

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area than a Maxi pad—tiptoe across the sidewalk, change demeanors, and walk very seductively by a picnic table with four college-aged guys sitting at it. Then she casually returns to her group of friends. One of the guys notices her and tells his friends what she just did.

Then she does it again. Baffling the college guys, and, I am sure, exciting them at the same time. Then she does it again and again. And over the course of forty-five minutes arranges about seven or eight of these flirtatious trips across the sidewalk.

At this point, the college guys are laughing at her ridiculously obvious and immature attempts to gain their attention. They get up and walk away. I shake my head for the seventeenth time, and my eyes are back in my book.

A few minutes later she does it to me, prancing in front of me and tossing a piece of gum in the trash. I nearly lost it.

Then she does it one more time, walking straight up to me like she's going to say something. When I look up, I give her a look as if to say, "Okay, look. Maybe I don't look like I'm eight or nine years older than you, but remember, we're at Summerfest. And I'm reading a book. Shouldn't that in itself guarantee that I'm not going to fuck you?"

She turns around, and she and her friends are gone within fifteen seconds.

4:00 pm Grab some cheap brats and fries. So long, seven dollars.

6:00 pm Before heading to the Weezer show, I stop to check out Carbon Leaf, a Virginia band I've heard on Madison, Wisconsin's 105.5 Triple M. Not bad. Several really good songs. 3 1/2 taters.

7:25 pm Finish *Mystic River*. Excellent book, from start to finish. Great mystery, even better than the already pretty good movie. 4 taters.

7:30 pm The first opener is a band called The Fray. I'm impressed with their too-short set. 3 1/2 taters.

8:15 pm The Pixies come on. It's a reunion tour for them. Not that familiar with these guys, but the die-hards seem to be having a great time. 3 taters.

9:45 pm Weezer's on. I like Weezer. Weezer sounds really good live. Weezer sounds even better when you get to see them for free. 4 taters.

Friday, July 8th

12:00 pm I'm back again early today to get a free wristband for the BoDeans, Wallflowers, and Anna Nalick show.

12:15 pm Reading another Tom Perrotta book called *Little Children*, a satire of suburban parenthood. Not only are these thirty-something parents in pre-midlife-crisis crisis, but there's a convicted child molester living in their neighborhood. It doesn't get any better than that.

1:45 pm Oh, boy. While I'm reading my book, I see a goth kid with a cell phone. This is a Verizon triumph of epic proportions...or a goth kid not having the faintest idea why he's dressed like that.

4:00 pm Grab some brats and fries—so long, seven dollars—and catch the last part of a Dave Matthews cover band. And the lead singer sings all the songs as if Rob Thomas was covering Dave Matthews, a twist that probably deserves a record deal and a 40-city stadium tour.

7:30 pm Just finishing *Little Children*. A great, funny satirical and ironic ending. I love how smoking cigarettes brings people together! 5 taters.

Anna Nalick comes on. Not so into her. A little too much girlish prancing around the stage. 2 taters.

8:30 pm Wallflowers come out to play. I really like the Wallflowers and have always wondered why their popularity fell off the face of the earth while Matchbox Twenty continues to rock the planet. (I think I stole that thought from someone else.) Ho-hum. During the concert, I am checked out by a woman in her early twenties as she walks by my seat. I am reeling a little because she's not that attractive. No sooner does she go past me than her mom (no question it's her mom) comes behind her and checks me out too. I feel violated, like a piece of meat. Then I debate for a short time whether—if the right situation were to occur—I would become intimate with a mother-daughter dynamic duo. I decide that no, I wouldn't; however, if they were dynamic enough, I promised myself that I would open the issue for reconsideration at that point in time. Wallflowers: 3 taters.

10:00 pm I bail before the BoDeans come on. I'm getting tired of Summerfest.

Saturday, July 9th

4:30 pm Christ, it's almost over. I meet up with a couple of friends I hadn't seen in a few years, Derek and Rachel. We eat cotton candy and catch up.

9:00 pm Derek, Rachel, and I sit outside the women's bathroom and watch the I've-been-drinking-every-night-for-ten-days-and-I-really-need-to-throw-up relay. Some woman, six fucks to the wind, tries to set me up with her friend whose boyfriend is standing next to me laughing. I'm properly confused. Derek and Rachel pump quarters into the foot massage machine that I'm sitting on, and the drunk woman decides to sit on the massager, leaving what she's doing up to everyone's imagination. What the hell just happened?

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10:00 pm Derek and Rachel head home, and I stay for an O.A.R. concert. I can barely hear the show as I stand amongst a crowd of people in their early twenties, packed so tight no one can move, and they're all talking and yelling at their friends or into their cell phones. People are trying to push their way closer or out of the way to make a beer run or a bathroom run or an oxygen run or all three.

I know I'm just one irrational shove away from being crushed to death in a pile of hot, sweaty drunk people, none of whom I know. Yet, I stay for the whole show, wondering how irrational that is. And I wonder, too, why while I am minding my own business, two girls come up and start grinding with me, before they eventually realize I'm much more interested in O.A.R. than them. And I wonder why this nice guy and his girlfriend turns to me—right after the grinders leave me—and offers me his pipe and lighter as consolation. I turn him down, reviewing the fact that that was just about as close as I've ever gotten to smoking weed. I'm such a douche. Before the end of the show, yet another girl tries to dry hump me, completely unsolicited, and now I am absolutely positive that I am out of my element. And I think it's time to go home. O.A.R. show: 2 1/2 aters.

Sunday, July 10th

3:00 pm Last day of the Fest, and I skip it to buy Linda some Mexican food and celebrate never having to return to that hellhole again. With tickets and food I only spent \$65 there—what most Summerfest goers spend in an hour—and saw a few dozen bands that I may have spent hundreds of dollars on in a more lucrative time of my life. So it was worth it.

Over chips and salsa, I decide that though the music was great, it really isn't fair to call Summerfest a music festival. Especially the world's largest one. That's merely an excuse to show up. A more accurate way to capture the spirit of Summerfest would be to call it the “World's Largest Amount Of Assholes To Drink Themselves Into An Inconceivable Stupor And Wash Up Dead On The Shores Of Lake Michigan The Following Morning Festival.” That is the main draw...generally...and not the music unfortunately. And definitely why people cannot wait until next year to do it all over again. Although I probably won't be joining them unless some really good bands are playing.