

Walk This Way

Black Stone Cherry, The Darkness and Foreigner ramble, rock and roll in the Deep South of England...

RAMBLIN' MAN FAIR

FRIDAY, JULY 19-SUNDAY, JULY 21

Mote Park, Maidstone

THERE IS something in the air at Ramblin' Man Fair that draws pilgrims back to a sleepy park in Kent each year, as if to a shared secret. Perhaps it's the heady perfume of freshly cut grass and smoky barbecues on the breeze, or the sound of bona fide rock legends and hotshot up-and-comers that fills the air. More than likely, though, it's the atmosphere of camaraderie that keeps the spirit of Ramblin' Man strong. As early birds filter into Mote Park on Friday, one seasoned gent raises a cup and cries, "Let's rock!" His call is addressed to no one in particular, but is met with cheers from perfect strangers, kicking off the fair's fifth year - and a vintage one at that.

Shrugging off the typical British summer drizzle, Aussie rockers **The Lazys** bound onto the Main Stage like dogs let off the leash, with Leon Harrison's gruff bark matching his shaggy-haired crew's biting pub rock. Meanwhile, bravado and rolling grooves are **Kris Barras Band's** calling cards. Their leader's nimble, Stevie Ray Vaughan-esque fretwork during Vegas Son, though, proves that former MMA star Barras

KEVIN NIXON



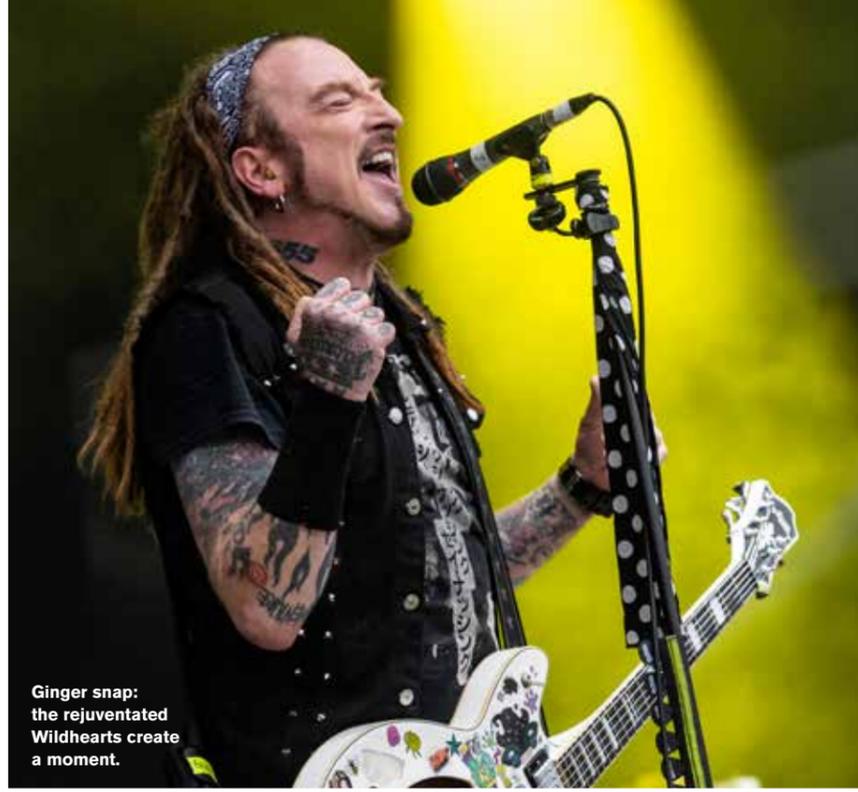
Pugilistic bluesman: Kris Barras.

has more than a little pugilistic blues up his tattooed sleeves.

"We've got technical gremlins trying to disrupt our set, but we won't let them," announces the ever-pugnacious Ginger during a rare break in **The Wildhearts'** helter-skelter set. True, as the title-track of recent album *Renaissance Men* proudly declares, "You can't keep a good band down." The rejuvenated Wildhearts are that and then some. Dislocated and middle-fingered serenade Let 'Em Go from that album are delivered with the same piss and vinegar as thrash-punk classic Caffeine Bomb. Most memorably, though, Ginger and his comrades seem genuinely touched by the full-throated response each song receives from this crowd.

Naturally, **The Darkness** throw themselves into the pomp and circumstance of their pole position billing tonight. Growing On Me and Love Is Only A Feeling are popped off quicker than you can say, "Ooh, matron." Great bolts of flame erupt seemingly every five minutes, though the most flamboyant displays belong to the band themselves. Justin Hawkins delivers his best Vincent Price impression in the monologue preceding Barbarians, before being reverentially handed a Les Paul like a sword with which he might slay dragons.

It's the pure panto that we've come to expect from Lowestoft's lewdest sons, but what should never be underestimated is their tightly drilled performance. Each of Rufus Taylor's snare cracks land squarely in the guts and even as Hawkins struts around like a glam rooster, he hits every ridiculous falsetto note, setting the bar this weekend. ➤➤



Ginger snap: the rejuvenated Wildhearts create a moment.



The Darkness on the edge of (Maidstone) town: Justin Hawkins and co. set the bar for the weekend.

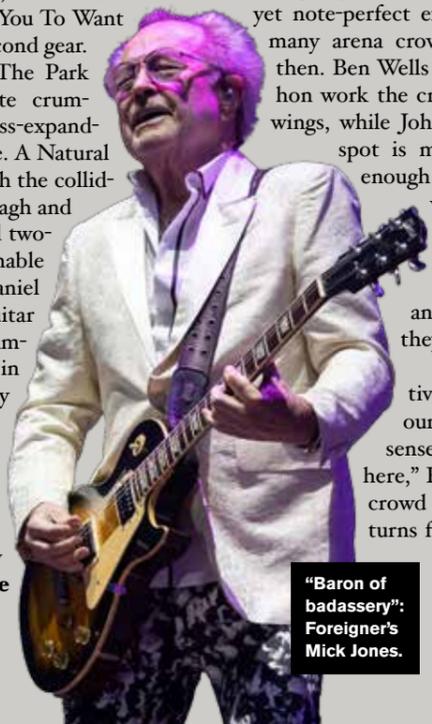
← **SATURDAY ROLLS** around and so does the sun, making the rootsy grooves of the Outlaw Country Stage the perfect first stop. Cornish troubadours **Wile And The Bandits** tease out fine vigilante blues, before Texas' own man in black, **Jesse Dayton**, unleashes a hot-rod rockabilly take on AC/DC's Whole Lotta Rosie. Both acts prove the perfect primer for **The Temperance Movement** on the Main Stage. Snake-hipped vocalist Phil Campbell (not that one) testifies with a holler like a bourbon-soaked bag of gravel as he whoops, twists and whips up the audience during Only Friend's sinful boogie. It's an ecstatic, maraca-shaking affair, but the Movement know that a little tenderness goes a long way. Hence the sultry A Deeper Cut is a soul-stirring triumph today

"We thought our invitation to this festival was getting lost in the mail, because our boy's daddy wrote Ramblin' Man!" chides Devon Allman as he gestures to his running mate, Duane Betts. **The Allman Betts Band** certainly have a fine pedigree, featuring sons of Allman Brothers Dickie Betts and Gregg Allman, but the sextet trade on their own considerable chops. They storm through hard-travelling guitar jams like a freewheeling locomotive, and when **Black Stone Cherry** guitar-slinger Ben Wells sits in to trade licks and million-dollar smiles with Allman and Betts, they show no sign of slowing down.

After such grit and virtuosity, **Cheap Trick's** set feels pedestrian by comparison. The pop rock legends are chock-full of easy charisma, with rock's other schoolboy guitarist Rick Nielsen pulling a comically endearing "who, me?" expression each time a riff is recognised by the crowd. What is sorely missing, though, is the evergreen energy that these songs embody. Sadly, not even the gleaming hooks of I Want You To Want Me can pull them out of second gear.

Over on the Prog In The Park Stage, **Anathema** navigate crumbling lows and consciousness-expanding melodic highs with ease. A Natural Disaster ebbs and flows with the colliding vocals of Vincent Cavanagh and Lee Douglas, while spectral two-part piece Untouchable explodes into life with Daniel Cavanagh's whale-song guitar leads. "Scream for me Ramblin' Man!" Daniel roars in jest, and seems pleasantly surprised when the rapt audience oblige. After such a powerhouse display of chemistry, who can blame them?

Tonight undoubtedly belongs to **Black Stone Cherry**, however.



"Baron of badassery": Foreigner's Mick Jones.

The all-American heavyweights come out swinging with an opening one-two of Rain Wizard and Me And Mary Jane, while Ben Wells high kicks around frontman Chris Robertson like an excitable spaniel circling a bear. This is the second time they've headlined Ramblin' Man and by the ecstatic hero's welcome they receive, you suspect they feel just as home in Kent as in their native Kentucky.

Burnin' and Ain't Nobody from 2018's *Family Tree* slide seamlessly into the familiar Southern-fried riffing of Like I Roll. Compared to their 2016 headline set – a barn-stormer by any measure – the band's relaxed, yet note-perfect execution reflects the many arena crowds conquered since then. Ben Wells and bassist Jon Lawhon work the crowd, often swapping wings, while John Young's drum solo spot is mighty, yet courteous enough to not overstay its welcome. It's the sign of a band confident enough to let their songs do the talking, and have a blast while they're at it.

"The reason this festival has become one of our favourites is the sense of brotherhood here," Robertson says to the crowd sincerely as he returns for the encore. "From the folks who come here to the people that put this on, it's



a family, and that's how we learned our whole thing," he continues, before closing the night with an a cappella Peace Is Free. He has always possessed a soulful wail closer to gospel greats like Solomon Burke than, say, Skynyrd's Ronnie Van Zant. Tonight, bolstered by a whole field singing with him, the gentle giant brings it all home in spell-binding, heartfelt fashion.

COME SUNDAY afternoon, the mighty **Inglorious** arrive with vintage rock that draws from the same wellspring as Deep Purple. Following major membership changes last year, lion-haired singer Nathan James now prowls the stage as the band's undisputed leader. Yet the fresh dynamic between guitarists Dan Stevens and Danny Dela Cruz is invigorating stuff, and James digs it as much

Turning Kent into Kentucky: Black Stone Cherry's Chris Robertson.



Happy ramblers: (clockwise from above) Airbourne get carried away; Chris Robinson Brotherhood; Black Stone Cherry and Main Stage crowd; Cheap Trick's Rick Nielsen.



as the crowd. On a far more laidback tip, **Chris Robinson Brotherhood** summon sun-drenched grooves. The former Black Crowe at their helm cuts the figure of a shamanic beach bum, mouth agape in wonder as his cohort masterfully stretch Rosalee into a 15-minute sortie through tie-dyed reggae and freaky psychedelia to a bluesy epiphany.

Trust **Airbourne**, then, to blast away the weed haze with red-blooded tunes dedicated to rocking, having rocked or getting ready to rock. "People say we're not particularly creative or original, but we're just like Jack and Coke," muses frontman Joel O'Keeffe as he pours himself just such a beverage. "It hits the spot if you wanna rock your balls off." Airbourne's hell-raising hijinks are, indeed, tried-and-tested – look, they're smashing beer cans again! – but, like JD, they go down smoothly.

For a pint of the darker stuff, **Orange Goblin** are your men. The sizeable crowd gathered by the Grooverider Stage is testament to their well-earned reputation as one of the most dependably earthshaking forces in British metal. They hammer Saruman's Wish harder than they did two decades ago. Even when affable man-mountain Ben Ward's commands for carnage only elicit awkward shuffling from pint-clutching punters, it doesn't faze him. Instead, he cackles impishly and suffices with high-fiving the front row.

Foreigner are, undeniably, the softest of this year's headliners, yet they succeed by giving people exactly what they want. Cold As Ice, Feels Like The First Time – no songs this side of 1985 make an appearance, yet the band approach them with an excitement that is

impossible to deny. Vocalist Kelly Hansen relishes his role as ringleader and yacht rock's answer to Laurence Llewellyn Bowen, working his showbiz charm and introducing founding guitarist Mick Jones as "the baron of badassery". Before long, everyone is along for the ride, even Inglorious's Nathan James, who can be seen roaring closer Hot Blooded with the rest of the crowd. Same time next year then, Nathan? *JAMES MACKINNON*

BEST MOMENT: The sound of a field singing Peace Is Free along with a visibly touched Chris Robertson during Black Stone Cherry's encore feels like a story to be recounted by returning ramblers.