

CATCHING THE VIBES OF JISAN

Muddying the music festival water in search of sonic transcendence

I'm going to have to call your boss," the ticket girl said impatiently, her face scrunched together like a sweaty raisin. There was no line under the press tent at the Jisan Valley Rock Music and Art Festival where my ogre-of-an-advisor Binx and I stood, but I sensed the girl's morning had been turbulent.

"Wait. Don't do it!" I said quickly, grabbing the phone from her hand with such force it practically knocked my sunglasses off. "He gets snippy with people he doesn't know. You would too—it's not pleasant being mistaken for some barbaric warrior from the Joseon Dynasty every day. For all I know he's not even awake yet."

"It's 12:30 in the afternoon," she said, eyeing us.

She had backed me into a corner and there was no getting out of this one.

"He's a late sleeper. It's a common characteristic in this business. But enough about that, let's cut to the chase. I'm a top-notch reporter from a very prestigious news organization and the only explanation for this mix-up is that there's no explanation at all and that God's up to his usual mid-day f ckery. But I'll have you know, it's never too late to do the right thing. Do you understand me?"

But she clearly hadn't. And judging by the sour look on her face, I could tell that her patience had dwindled. The look was one I had seen all too often in Korea when it became clear that the metaphorical line of toleration had been crossed and the veneer of a helpful, harmonious person, who moments ago seemed perfectly willing to move heaven and earth to assist me, dramatically fades. It's like an exorcism, but in reverse. I had lost my grip on the exchange—talking my way into a press pass was a lost cause.

"Never mind then. I must be at the wrong festival." I turned to walk away, but Binx had been waiting at my shoulder for his turn to throw himself into the fire. He moved his face closer to hers.

"Do you see this man? He suffers from

an acute lack of cognitive flexibility," Binx said. "Stems from an overactive cingulate gyrus. Simply put, his anger can be triggered at any discomfort. He's a walking minefield," Binx said to her, voice low and steady.

"Quiet, you maniac. Now isn't the time for that sort of nonsense," I said.

He looked at me. Then, sucking his tooth, turned toward the main entrance.

"Suit yourself."

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An hour earlier, we had stumbled off the local bus at the Jisan Mart and into swamp-like humidity. From underneath the mart's red and yellow sign streaked a half-naked baby. His mother, the cashier of the shop, quickly scooped the child up, and stood watching us. This was the true backcountry—farms, dingy snowboard shops, and low-lit restaurants with storefronts that hadn't been washed in decades scattered down the county road. From the look of things, only those with a very specific purpose came here—and a purpose we indeed had. We were here on an anthropological excavation of sonic proportions, with the intent of floating down the aural river of Korean culture and dissecting the vibes of Jisan. But while I profess that I'm no expert when it comes to music, there does exist

a certain kind of trance-inducing quality in many genres that can cut so close to the heart and soul that the listener becomes forever altered—call it a kind of auditory, psychotropic high. It's a slippery slope because there's no telling what kind of transformation the user will find him or herself in, nor how long he or she will be gone until appearing on the other side of that wormhole. But like my advisor, I too considered this one of the only types of true living. And so we went down the wormhole, became absorbed into the threads of space and time and all that the sonic universe had to offer.

Crowds descended upon the The Jisan Valley Rock Music and Arts Festival by the tens of thousands. Families, couples, college students, eager fangirls and fanboys hoping to catch a glimpse of their favorite celebrities all flocked to the Jisan Forest Resort for this three-day event.

The sun hung directly overhead as we passed beneath the blue streamers shimmering at the entrance gate. I remember feeling stuck in the humidity. It was like trudging through a thick marsh. Dragonflies buzzed along our path as we continued up Valley Road—the concrete tributary that fed the three performance stages, dance hall, and concession areas. People had already staked out territory, setting up picnic blankets and inflatable chairs. One man had even sprawled out like road kill on the hot pavement.

We walked by two girls with tiger-ear headbands, each holding signs with the letters "LANY." My advisor swung his head around.

"What's a Lane-y?" he shot.

The tiger girls looked back laughing, but didn't stop to answer.

"Must be some millennial thing."

"Beats me, man—maybe it's a seating section or something. Could mean anything nowadays."

Just then, the reverberation of a clean, electric guitar and the loungey vocals from the band Raw By Peppers interrupted us. A hundred or so people stood around, nodding to the hypnotizing strum of

"Cosmic Boy." In unison, they sank away, off into the vibes, and the mud below our feet grew thicker.

We sloshed through the mud to the concession square—a manic area of pizza, chicken, noodles, blow-up flamingos and whales, a motorized surfboard game, and a walk-through jungle spraying perfumed mist.

We soon came to understand exactly what a "Lane-y" was, or rather, who they were. Sandwiched between the Johnnie Walker "Whisky and Lemon" booth and the Cass beer game, fangirls lined up in giddy anticipation for a meet and greet with the band LANY—a group comprised of a middle-aged bald guy, a lost member of the Trailer Park Boys, and a surfer. Sometime in the months before, a university professor friend of mine reported that his class despised baldness. They hated it so much that they had concluded unanimously a husband with a cue ball was far worse than his wife-beating counterpart. Odd. But personal appearance often meant life or death in Korea. Despite this, the three band members were showered with gifts and hugs in a warm welcome from the fangirls.

As we wandered around the square, the mud got thicker, caking to my shoes. The humidity shot higher. It was like walking around with an anchor attached to my back, every movement weighed down my skeletal structure more and more. There was little doubt that eventually my whole body would crumble under its own weight.

And then, dragonflies—

"Oh, sh_t—the dragonflies. They're everywhere." I remember saying.

It was near a stage named Green Pampas that my feet sunk into the ground and I fell forward into the patch of grass. I rolled onto my back, watching the clouds checker the sky. Dragonflies hovered above me, their 20,000 eyes telescoping in and out. I melted into the swamp, quickly fading into a daydream.

When I emerged, I stood in front of a person wearing a goat mask and jumping up and down in the middle of a circle of people. Distorted power chords ripped from the Tune Up stage, where Harry Big Button blasted their song, "Coffee, Cigarettes, and Rock 'N' Roll." In the center of this circle stood a shirtless member of the "Goat Tribe," hair hanging to his lower back. He began running around, high-fiving

everyone. As he circled back to his original starting position, another shirtless guy jumped in—and then another and another until an inner circle had been created. And as the drums smashed from the speakers, the moshing began. "...Taste, enjoy, reveal yourself. Coffee, cigarettes, and rock'n'roll." Wild metal fans threw their bodies against one another, ping-ponging about. The moshing expanded outward until I found myself pulled into the chaos.

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I HEARD MUSIC AND THE TREES OPENED UP REVEALING WHAT COULD ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS A MODERN DAY GILLIGAN'S ISLAND WITH SINISTER OVERTONES OF PAGAN WORSHIP

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At the end of every song, a tribal chant rang out. At first I didn't understand, but then the leader held up his hand, it was a credit card, "Card, card, card!" chanted the Goat-tribal moshers. They continued until the owner of the card had claimed it.

Uncertain of what to make of all this, I yelled to my advisor.

"We're still in Korea, right?"

When he didn't answer, I looked over. He had disappeared. Had the vibes become too much?

I soon took my leave and wandered to the edge of the road. A dirt trail ran into the woods from which a purple light shined. I walked down the trail passing some white sheets hanging from the tree branches. I heard music and the trees opened up revealing what could only be described as a modern day Gilligan's Island with sinister overtones of pagan worship. Translucent inflatable inner tubes lay around the clearing. The DJ had set up a card table on uneven ground, still managing to play the song YMCA. When it reached the lyric "Let yourself free..." a gangly white hipster in a Vietnamese rice hat and Wayfarer sunglass-

es picked up an inner tube. Lifting it around his waist, he started to gyrate vigorously in all directions. He turned to me and bowed.

"Namaste," he said.

"Indeed," I replied.

"You realize you're in Korea," Binx said to Gangly.

Not missing a beat, Gangly responded, "Bruh, we're all one world."

He handed Binx an inner tube. "My name's Michael. Do you dance?"

"Do I look like I dance?"

Michael stopped moving and considered this. "Never too late to start," said Michael. And then he danced away.

"Where's the bar?" Binx said.

Who were these f_ucking people? And why were they here? Perhaps they had taken the wrong bus and instead of arriving at the Myeongdong shopping district, they had arrived smack-dab in the middle of the woods. It was anybody's guess.

Binx and I moved over to the makeshift bar; at this point, things became hazy. I remember making eye contact with one of the bartenders and being directed to a drink sign, confused as to why the only two choices were vodka mixed with energy drink or vodka mixed with orange juice. I asked the bartender for a shot of Bombay. She again smiled and again redirected me to the menu, upon which I became frustrated and finally settled on the vodka with orange juice. But when I attempted to pay for the drink, she informed me that cash wasn't accepted. The whole thing was a clusterfck of monstrous proportions. Finally, I managed to take hold of the drink and leave before the scene became any slimmer.

Night had fallen by the time we made it out of the woods. Through the dark floated the velvety voice of R&B singer Gallant. As we approached the stage, a strobe cracked and he arose from the shadows, violet light flicked on backlighting plumes of fog. Midway into his performance, Gallant began ironing clothes and watering the plants. He must have some interest in domestic housework, I reasoned.

Whatever his intention, the audience followed. One girl tore off her bra and catapulted it towards the stage. She had fallen into the vibes; in fact, the whole crowd had. And on those vibes they'd remain until two mornings later at 10 a.m., when the final shuttle would depart from the humid Jisan swamp. ☸