

JIM EVANS reports from the Bilzen festival SO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

PHIL LYNOTT: "Festivals are very weird. If one comes off, it's a magic moment."
Welcome to Bilzen 1977. A four-day rock festival somewhere in the flat Belgian countryside — 100 kilometres from Brussels, 420 from London. Geographic report OK? On with the show.

THURSDAY, DAY ONE

Rumours that the Sex Pistols are to appear are soon quashed. But, say the promoters, it's going to be a punk evening. Should prove interesting.

The scene is like a time warp, something between Woodstock and the Isle of Wight. Tents and camp fires, beer cans, hippies, yeah, long hair and peace, man. And the village is well into the spirit of the occasion — there's nothing else in Belgium to do today and a catch, the Hari Krishna bald-heads are ranting up and down the streets of the small village that is Bilzen. T-shirts, beads, first aid and chips available at the back of the site. Those with special passes, this way please, behind the dual stage...

Back stage — jiggers' bar, roadies a-plenty and caravans for dressing rooms. Who's this dude in the black-rimmed specs? Why, it's young Elvis Costello — the one they've all been raving about. Elvis: "No point in keeping 'em waiting, let's get on with it."

Front stage, a tall, barbed wire fence separates the kids from the vast Press enclosure which runs up to the stage. Such remoteness between genuine (paying) audience and performers could mean trouble. Read on.

So it's ELVIS COSTELLO and his band, THE ATTRACTIONS. They kick off with 'Don't Blame It On Me' and rapidly move into 'I'm Angry', both well-built songs. But young Elvis is angry, he's not happy with the lighting — there isn't any and he's not happy with the fence. "What is this? A F----- prison camp? What are all these journalists doing here? Let the people in."

With dead-pan face he gears into 'No Action' and 'American Man'. He's getting a reasonable response but "all you people sitting at the back, this is 1977, wake up!" They do, slightly and encouraged by the artists start to work on the fence — sorta pushing it into his two best numbers 'Less Than Zero' and 'Red Shoes', both excellent songs and arrangements built around the musicianship of this soon-to-be star. Not suggesting anything, or attempting to detract from Elvis' performance, they played Springsteen's 'Born To Run' after his set and it had the same ring of wincey. Good set. The multi-national punters were starting to get into the mood.

Festival organiser: "This first night is an experiment. Punk is a bit in Belgium. The state-controlled radio is not at all adventurous. Festivals are the only real chance the bands have of getting to the people."

Elvis to the Damned: "You really gotta go out and spend them." Them referring to the heavy meathead bouncers safely enclosed behind the barbed wire.

THE DAMNED: I forgot to mention, there was a jazz band on straight after Elvis. I forgive me Charlie Parker — so enter Vanium and friends. The Captain knocks over the mike stand, the show goes on. Frantic. Encouraged by Vanium the kids get more and more excited, they're really pushing at that fence now. It's in danger of giving way. The boys are in good form with

'Come On' and 'You Take My Money'. Searchlights beam down from the control tower, glinting on the wire — Colditz? "Bilzen, not Belsen," roars the Captain before throwing his red cap to the crowd. Beer cans and other sundries start to fly. "Problem. Child" good, energy, excitement, etc. all you've ever been told about this music. Vanium jumps down from the stage — "Get that F----- fence down. Helped back on stage. An OK set but people were more intent on removing the fence than getting into the music. And I don't see that the new guitarist makes a lotta difference."

Rat Scabies, commenting on the stage bombardment: "It's just like being back home."
Elvis: "I feel like Steve McQueen when he fell off his motor bike in the Great Escape."

THE CLASH: A band very much in form.

they were talking about the violence. They were concerned about the kids getting hurt. Really concerned. With all due respect, that's not what you read in the Press."

FRIDAY, DAY TWO

And on the second day, behold it rained. Poured down all day and night. Sleepy-eyed, eventually make the festival site — thanks for the lift and all the help, Greta — look for Noah, but he's not around. Missed the Abbot Dance Band, but then you can't win them all. Wait for the appearance of Motor City Mad Man Ted Nugent. Meanwhile, backstage comment: "These Continentals couldn't organise an orgy in a brothel." But they could. They can organise festivals better than we can over here.

Belgium: country of bitter youth. "There's no free radio here. No chance of it. But the Government sell guns, Russia, China, all over the world."

Belgium: country of high prices. Two coffees £1.50. Ham omelet, no chips, £2.

Belgium: fasted moving thing, taxi meters. Don't go by cab in Belgium.

Mud, rain, sitting in a marquee drinking watery beer, poking at very spare ribs. Is this real? What's happening. But wait, is that

likes of 'Fool's Gold' with duelling guitars and the modulations of 'Harlem' and 'For all you people on bad trips' — 'Thunder And Rain' — 'Gypsy Blood'. Fast Singsong 'White Honey'. 'Soft Shoes' from the first album. Encore: had to be. 'Hold Back The Night'. Wall of sound. Up: coming European tour bodes well for the band.
It's wet and it's cold and it's late. URIAH HEEP: the band the critics love to hate. Love 'em or hate 'em, Heep set that audience — that wet, dedicated audience — on fire.

Ken Hensley "Festivals are like motor racing, you're always watching the weather to see if you've gotta change your tyres."
First time I've seen them with vocalist John Lawton. Mix not quite right to start with. Band plagued — as many are at Bilzen — by monitor trouble, lack of monitors to be precise. Take me across the water and I'll warm 'em up, singalong from 'Salisbury' even better. There must be some 8,000 kids out there now, braving the elements. It's only rock 'n' roll. Hensley remains the focal point of the band, whether on keyboards or guitar, but Box, Boulder and Kerslake are integral parts. Christ, the band are into their 13th album.

They entertain. 'Easy those kids today. The rain's stopped but it ain't the height of comfort, still out there in all that uncomfortable mud. So the Scottish band take the stage. 4.35 pm Saturday. Second number, 'Gonna Capture Your Heart' captures 'em. There's like a gentle Eagles feel to their music. It was a hit on both sides of the Atlantic and it's easy to see why. Playing to an audience of multi-coloured umbrellas and assorted head gear they carry on in country-rock vein with 'Bring Back The Love' from the new album — thoughts of Walsh and Frey at Wembley.

They have harmonies, they have good time music — you need bands like these at festivals. The little track from the new album 'Another Night Time' bodes well, but 'I'm Alone' from the same platter must rate as a superior cut — at least live.

A too short set. Blue are faced with the so-called 'new wave' and they'll surface on the right side. Ian MacMillan, Blue: "I'd like us to be really hard to pin - point. I'd like to be recognised all across the board and have our numbers covered by people from Ray Conniff to Eric Clapton."

Charlie Smith, Blue: "Elton's not the usual millionaire."
STANLEY CLARKE BAND: no time for a long review but the guy can play the bass. Eight-piece band including Raymond Gomez on guitar, Peter Robinson on keyboards and Alfie Williams on sax. Loved the bluesy 'Schooldays'. Another time, Stan, more space. The kids loved you too.

Hmmm, the guy on the disco's playing Clapton tracks 'Carnival', 'Sunshine Of Your Love' and 'Layla'. And to think of uncle Eric is sunning himself in Spain.

IAN GILLAN BAND: The ex-DEEP Purple singer and his band — Ray Fenwick, John Gustafson, Colin Towns and Mark Nauseef — kicked off with a rockin' 'Lucille' followed by the gentler 'Child In Time'. He still has a hell of a voice and almost hit the top in the long 'Money Lender' and the screaming 'Over The Hill', cruising home with 'Smoke On The Water'. But Gillan did not come back for more and afterwards was far from happy.

AEROSMITH: Yup, it's America's very own high-energy fast - movin' hard rock outfit. Frontman Stephen Tyler in jerking Juggersque form, Joe Perry's lead guitar follies to the rhythm of Kramer and Whitman. Load. Good

Livein' brings la maison down. Mass choral response from t' kids. Back for the real head - basher 'Gypsy'. Dancing searchlights and into the Astral planes with more singalong and 'Sweet Lorraine'. Look, it's the kids that matter and they really got off on Heep... Look, I'm wet through. And the mud, the mud. It's like a bleedin' farmyard, back stage and front stage. Limos grounded, trucks up to their axles. All right if I miss out on Jon Hiseman's Colossus 'Ev' After all, there's still two days to go.

SATURDAY DAY THREE
It's beginning to get a shade confusing. Arrival of Blue, billed as 'Elton John's New Discovery'. Best thing they bring with them, company and music apart, is a much-needed supply of Scotch.

Hugh Nicholson, Blue: "I feel sorry for the people out there." Looking around at the mud and chaos back stage: "Belgium seems a really grey country. Have we got any wellies? If Elton was here his roadies would be going round in gold 'EJ' embossed boots."
BLUE: Right, it's going to take something to rouse



GRAHAM PARKER AND THE RUMOUR: well rehearsed set.

Strummer to the fore, they're well together. 'I'm So Bored With The USA' and the very apt 'The Prisoner', both excellent. But the gap — the no-man's land — the Press enclosure isn't helping. Strummer, in his best French, "Why is there space left?" That fence is rockin' as much as the band. More frantic. Strummer leaps off the stage, runs to the fence. The meatheads are confused, the kids are going wild. The hall of cans continues. Bottles and rocks even. Could be nasty.

"This seems like a nice time to sing 'Hate And War'. You're the most grateful audience since the Grateful Dead." "Career Opportunity" "White Riot" — playing a blinder. The beer cans and bottles, other objects de festival continue to wing festively but that was a one hell of a performance. That's only the third time I've seen the band. They're going places — further than a violent Belgian village.

Ken Hensley, hotel 2 am Friday: "I really wanted to see The Clash, see what they're all about. We came back from America and it was all happening. They came into the bar last now,

thunder? Loud rumblings, my friends, coming from a stagewards direction...
TED NUGENT: His music is thunderstorm-style heavy metal. Would have been appropriate for him to re-do his tank intro. With squirrel tails, one he shot for the World Wildlife Fund? Hair band to the aft and fore, he lets rip and the kids love him. Jumping, glaring, sitting, strutting, strutting — look out Hammersmith, the mad manipulator means business. So do his band — Cliff Davies on drums, Derek Si Homes on guitar and Rob Grange on bass. Ultimate Nugent: 'Cat Scratch Fever', 'Death By Misadventure' and 'Storm Trooper'. The storm clouds of heavy metal made a lot of friends at Bilzen. Remember he started out in the late sixties with the then-called punk outfit the Amboy Dukes?

I plant les chats et les chiens — GRAHAM PARKER AND THE RUMOUR: Does he really need weather? Well rehearsed, Where does that little guy get from? Questions, always questions. Just enjoy the

reaction from the hippies. But I think I'm suffering from rock overdose — or is it double pneumonia? — only one more act tonight...
SMALL FACES: I need tell you little more about Steve Marriott and friends except they've improved mucho mucho since the start of their 'reunion' tour. They had big problems with the monitors — there weren't any. Marriott can gob fur further than any punk. Marriott: "I'm the original punk anyway." Marriott's 4th Bilzen. They played oldies like 'Watches Gonna Do 'Bout It', 'Hitchycock Park', 'Tin Soldier', 'All Or Nothing' and material from the new 'Playmates' album. Best number: 'High 'N' Happy'. Conclusion: fun-time music, well-rehearsed. Looks like this band will go on for ever.

SUNDAY, DAY FOUR
HORSLIPS: green dragons on the drum riser. Pleasant enough. Kids get off on the Jg - sections. Long, varied piece from 'The Book Of Inventions' gets deserved applause. Like-wise the Irish history lesson, 'The Wrath Of The Rain'. Despite being called back for more, the lads weren't bawling. Spokesman: "All bands look for perfection and you can't get that in a place like this." It's only rock and roll.

JOHN MILES: A small plane is circling the site, trailing a banner with the legend 'Sensational Alex Harvey Band'. Alex who? JM — how did he keep his trousers so spotlessly white in all that mud? Kicks off with 'House On The Hill'. Powers through the likes of 'Rebel' and 'Pull The Damn Thing Down' and the slower 'Glamour Boy' from the 'Stranger In The City' album. The varied moods of 'Music' and 'Slow Down' complete — well-received show. Miles is later to put even more action into a backstage beer fight with one Phil Lynott.

Phil Lynott: "I see my future in music, forever, one way or another. Whether I end up as an old jazz player in a seedy club or as a producer, I'll see it through, you can't control the future."
THIN LIZZY: thunder-lash, gong, crash, bang, into 'Soldier Of Fortune'. Then 'Jailbreak' which sends the punters wild, followed by 'Warriors' from the 'Jailbreak' LP and 'Dancin' In The Moonlight'. Lizzy were the only band over the whole four days to get a sound check. It was a worthwhile exercise. Brian Robertson, still suffering from arm trouble — not helped by a



THIN LIZZY: set the festival alight.

fight in Finland last week — started to get it together in the bluesy 'Still In Love With You'.

But the band are happier on the harder, faster numbers — if Scott's hair gets much longer I'll get tangled in his six - string — like 'The Boys Are Back In Town' and 'Don't Believe A Word'. Lynott really winds the kids up — clenched fists, exaggerated movements, strutting machine - gun style with his bass. For all the young ladies on the road... 'Bad Reputation'. Together with 'Emerald' and 'Rocker' and you have, boys and girls, the complete Thin Lizzy, a band that can, and did, set a festival afire.

The second half of the set was magic. The first half stuttered, not helped by the vagaries of the lighting. The sunset — it wasn't raining for once — and the spots produced a weird combination. Yet the music won through handsomely. But at the end, violence was to rear its head again as the crowd, hungry for more, showered the stage with bottles, cans and anything that came to hand. Still, s'pose they had been there for four days.

Phil Lynott: 'Violence, rock 'n' roll and sub-cultures always go hand in hand. Blame it on youth versus establishment.'

SENSATIONAL ALEX HARVEY BAND: top of the bill, final night. Stars is back. Bagpipes on the PA... rush from the beer tent — now wash after a most amusing beer-fight — to the Press enclosure. But Christ, I can hardly keep my eyes open. This'll be the 15th band I've watched in four days. You can have too much of a good thing... enter Alex, glaring as usual, dressed as a pirate, long clemis stuck in his belt. Zal Clouston made it up as usual. Stars will 'Faith Healer' through 'Midnight Moses' to Del Shannon's 'Runaway'.

Brian Robertson: "Alex is great. He can take the P — out of anything. Runaway with a Glasgow accent". Alex has been preparing, rehearsing this new act for a while. This is a sort of rehearsal for Reading. More details then, cos I didn't take a lot of this in at Bilzen. I did say for one more number — 'Dancin' Of Love' which features some exotic dancing ladies. Brian Robertson was so busy watching this aspect he didn't notice the tomato wadding through the air to land splat on his forehead.

Bilzen for the last time. Final word from Alex: "King Kong was the first rock 'n' roller here." Time for the long sleep.

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