

Splitting the spectrum

Don't pack away your wellies just yet, there is one festival highlight left on the calendar. Ian McCabe talks to The Futureheads guitarist Ross Millard about Split

In a year which has seen numerous events across the globe bite the dust, the Split Festival at Sunderland's Ashbrooke Sports Club is reversing the trend.

Started back in 2009, initially as a small but successful fundraising event for the club, the festival organised in part by Sunderland band The Futureheads, brings together a perfect blend of popular mainstream acts with emerging talent from around the region.

"It's an opportunity to nurture young and local artists and give them that aspirational edge where they can share the stage and audience with national and international touring artists," says Ross Millard, Futureheads guitarist and the man responsible for booking the artists. "There are some local acts who are opening the main stage and there's no way they'd normally be playing the same bill as, say, The Cribs. It's educational in a sense and a great challenge for young bands, and there's nothing better for a



band than playing in front of a large audience."

"It's a real DIY work of art, there's no corporate sponsorship, no corporate money, it really relies on the ticket sales," he continues. "But I think people are becoming loyal to Split, it's been going for four years now and it's still going strong. It's a broad spectrum of artists that you wouldn't get under one roof anywhere else. I'm not sure if it could get any more exciting to be honest."

This year is expected to be bigger and better than ever, with acts playing across three stages, including The Cribs, Saint Etienne, Kathryn Williams, King Creosote and Field Music. There will also be performances from local talent such as The Lake Poets, Athletes in Paris and The Cornshed Sisters, plus The Futureheads will be closing the weekend on the main stage.



"Having all of these artists in one place is inspiring. Some bands, such as King Creosote wouldn't normally play in Sunderland in this kind of environment," says Ross. "It seems that all the same artists are all playing the same festivals each year and I think that's one area where Split is different. I think if we'd hired those artists we probably wouldn't have sold as many tickets. I think you have to be brave and do something different, it creates an identity and loyalty."

So what makes Split Festival different this year? "Primarily it's the quality of the artists," explains Ross. "We've got a folk tent from the Davy Lamp folk club in Washington, which is an institution to those who know about it, we're delighted to have them involved because it caters to a broader audience."

"We've also brought in some great gourmet food this year too, as some people actually come for the food now more so than the music. We're talking really top chefs, so punters can have something good to eat instead of greasy burgers."

"And we're working with the local community and Sunderland University, encouraging the students to get involved. We've got stores, outlets, bars and there's a film tent on the Friday."

After 10 years and five albums, The Futureheads are festival veterans and no stranger to playing in front of big audiences.

This summer they have performed at the Reading and Leeds Festivals, plus a gig in Durham Cathedral. However, Ross feels Split is a completely different experience and provides a unique new challenge.

"Split is always a different kind of gig for us. As it's our conception, it's kind of out there as a highlight of its own," he says. "As promoters, we're learning every year and we think there is a lot we can improve on from last year. We all have our different roles, organising, booking artists and so forth. It's quite funny, seeing us run around with walkie talkies in our different capacities, we'll be doing all that and then playing. It's exciting, but stressful, being on the inside you know what a band requires, what they're looking for and how they want to be treated."

Despite their success and international exposure over the past decade, the lads have never forgotten where their roots lie and made a purpose of supporting those within the North East music scene.

"When we were starting out there was no big internationally touring artists to look up to, you know? Some of our peers who were doing interesting things were pulling from the same local influences and it was the birth of a punk rock circuit in a way," Ross continues. "That had





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its basis in friendship and community, promoting each others shows, working on the doors, doing PA and what not, just showing up for each other.

That's never really disappeared from anyone around here from that time. It's nice to see that there's a new wave of other people doing it too, there's a real resurgence right now in the region."

He adds: "It's always been important to us to stay in the North East and do what we can because no one was really around to do that for us. It's why we set up Split, we have the opportunity to do it and to not do it just seems wrong.

"There aren't as many concert venues across the water in Sunderland, for whatever reason it gets less money spent on it and is often considered this lesser, scruffy neighbour to Newcastle and Gateshead. It shouldn't be because it has enough raw talent.

"There's an audience for creative and performance arts in Sunderland, and Split is a way of proving that and encouraging more days like this. If people come out and support us, then it's just the start."

The Split Festival takes place at Ashbrooke Sports Centre in Sunderland from September 21-23. To find out more and to book tickets visit www.split-music.co.uk