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Putting body and soul into a festival

A new festival aims to break the cycle of overwhelming apathy that currently has many of us in its grip

THE PREVAILING national mood of collective rage and despair, though born of injustice, is undoubtedly detrimental to our health and wellbeing. It's difficult to imagine a time when things will significantly improve.

Worryingly, it may prove hard to extricate ourselves from this snare of negativity, as self-destructive pessimism can cause us to spiral deeper into doom and gloom. As is the case with depression this can lead to apathy and inaction, and we may find it increasingly difficult to fight back.

We need a mechanism that allows us to break the cycle of overwhelming apathy that currently has us in its grip. We must seize control and identify the positive aspects of life, but how can this best be achieved?

One woman who believes she can offer a solution is Avril Stanley, the driving force behind the new Body & Soul Solstice Gathering, scheduled to take place over the weekend of June 19th-20th among the labyrinthine stone-walled gardens and woodlands that grace the picturesque grounds of Ballinlough Castle in Co Meath.

This first standalone foray by the team behind the Body & Soul area at Electric Picnic takes them a step closer to establishing a permanent festival space in Ireland. For Stanley, it represents the fulfilment of a vision that dates back to a time long before her involvement with Electric Picnic.

Thirteen years ago she organised a Samhain party for 300 people in Yosemite National Park in the US. "As a culture we used to come together regularly to celebrate and I've always dreamed of connecting back to the Celtic calendar," she says, adding that she wants "to achieve a re-enactment of a more poignant time when we were at one in the natural world, culturally and personally".

The festival theme is Phoenix Rising, taking into account the sense of collapse in Ireland and the prevailing uncertainty as to what comes next.

Stanley's intention is to provide an outlet – an opportunity to reflect on where we are and renew our flagging passion for life, to create a sense of community and to recapture our cultural identity, shared values and sense of fun.

This may not appeal to everyone, and such outward displays may seem no longer relevant to our national psyche. This writer joins the ranks of the sceptics when it comes to running around in the woods and connecting with inner harmony, but I'm willing to have my mind opened.

Stanley's theory is that our pent-up energy must find an outlet and needs to be harnessed as a positive, creative and empowering force. Much has been written about the benefits of anger management, positivity and creativity as therapy.

Psychoanalyst Otto Rank for one says that creativity is an "assumptions-breaking process".

If you sit in an office worrying that your job is under threat then perhaps taking time out to explore a different aspect of life will help relieve this tension and may lead to a change of focus.

To this end, the team is not prescriptive about the content and character of their fledgling festival and the "Participate" section of the website invites

members of the public to submit an idea or volunteer to help out. Avril believes there is a great appetite for this.

"We sit with that energy within us and never act on it," she says.

"We are dealing with so much negativity right now and the feeling of helplessness that this engenders leads to revolution or apathy. We appear to have chosen the latter."

Such endeavours may seem a little flaky to the uninitiated, but it's an attractive option to take time out from the drudgery of life to do something constructive and enjoyable.

Avril is adamant that even tiny ripples can make a difference if we incorporate some positive energy into our everyday lives.

The practicalities dictate that this will be an intimate event. Once volunteers are included, the total number on site will be close to 1,800. The target audience is "discerning mid-20s-plus, fun-loving people who love music and art but are also up to party and recapture the sense of freedom, playfulness and irresponsibility that they remember from their student days". Accompanied children are welcome and under-12s attend free of charge.

Musically the line-up is strong and a number of "pop-up" acts are also planned – a moonlit orchestra, a roaming samba band and impromptu theatre pieces.

A soul kids' area organised by the team behind the one at the Electric Picnic, visual arts workshops, a healing area with hot tubs, Sufi dancing and yoga in the woodlands, late night cabarets and a masquerade ball on Saturday night complete the mix.

In keeping with the traditional Celtic celebration of Solstice, the weekend will draw to a close with a fire ceremony marking new beginnings and the continuous cycle of change.

As Stanley describes it, "the festival is about sustainability and environment, but it's also about having a party and blowing out the cobwebs and being who you want to be and rocking out and taking a chance".

Her enthusiasm is infectious and she positively oozes passion as she declares that she feels, "courageous and audacious", adding, "We stand for this. We believe in this. We love this, and we think you will love it, too".

Perhaps it is time to give positivity a chance.

Tickets for the Body & Soul Solstice Festival (bodyandsoul.ie) are available via Ticketmaster and usual outlets and cost €109 for weekend camping and €55 for Sunday only.

**ELEANOR
FITZSIMONS**

“ The intention is to provide an opportunity to renew our flagging passion for life, and to recapture our cultural identity







Photographs taken from last year's Body & Soul area at Electric Picnic. The new Body & Soul Solstice Gathering will take place on June 19th-20th.