This is the year
You will go!

Crossing Border Festival - No Regrets

It’s another article about another festival coming to another venue in the Netherlands. You think you know what you’re going to do: read the article, maybe skim it for famous names, bands you recognise, authors you’ve read. Then you’re going to move on to the next feature in the magazine, completely forgetting to mark your agenda, or book tickets, or entice your friends out for a cultural adventure. Then, in December, you’re going to kick yourself when someone says: ‘Did you see Wesley Stace/Cassandra Wilson/Jhelisa Anderson/Will Self/John Langford/Stuart A. Staples/The Holmes Brothers at Crossing Border last month? He/she/they were fantastic!’
Performing this year at Crossing Border

Admiral Freebee
American Music Club & the film Street Angel
Andrew O’Hagan
Annelies Verbeke
Arjen Duinker
Arjen Lubach
Aukelien Weverling
Bart Chabot
Bas Bellerman
Benjamin Kunkel
Bernard Wesseling
Bettye Lavette
Cassandra Wilson
Catherine Feeny
Chad Harbach (n+1)
Chad Harnuch
De Kift
Die Surfpoeten
DJ Mike Conaghan
Gautam Malkani
Gjundler Abdullah
Hassan Bahara
Helene Gelens
In the Country
Jeffrey Lewis
Jhelia
Johan Harstad
John Power & his band
Jon Langford
Joshua Ferris
Julia Franck
Karine Martel
Keith Gessen (n+1)
Laura Hird
M.J. Hyland
Marc Roth (n+1)
Marcel Moring
Mark Greif (n+1)
Midlake
Mohammed ‘Jimmy’
Moh
Niccolo Ammaniti
Niels ’t Hooft
Nosfell
Panji Hit Squad
Pim te Bokkel
Prima Donkey
Richmond Fontaine
Rick Moody & the Wingdale Community Singers
Robert McLiam Wilson
Roosbeef
Said El Haji
Samira Atari
Sarah Hall
Stace England
Stuart A. Staples
Supersilent
Susanna & The Magical Orchestra
The Brian Jonestown Massacre
The Drams
The Holmes Brothers
The McCarricks
Thomas van Aalten
Tod Wodicka
Tom Naegels
Tony O’Neill
Trachtenburg Family Slideshow Players
Vikram Chandra
Wesley Stace
Will Self
William Boyd
Xavier Roelens
zzz
Don’t do it. Don’t make the same mistake you’ve made before, when you missed David Byrne jamming on stage with a mentally handicapped actor; or a nervous Lou Reed reading his version of The Raven and discussing its influence with his wife, Laurie Anderson; or a barefooted Michael Franti collaborating with Marie Daulne (Zap Mama) and Luka Bloom. Or how about the year you missed DBC Pierre, two weeks after he’d won the Booker Prize, even before he had a Dutch publisher?

Read this article. Then book your tickets. Today.

Crossing Border, a festival that these days completely takes over The Hague’s cultural centre for almost a week in November, started out with a squat and a typo 13 years ago.

Back then, the usual venues for literary performances were always about the same: small and quiet, with people listening and nodding approval. Festival director Louis Behre, a big fan of the Beat Generation, wanted to do something unique. He’d seen poets perform in a different way. So he gathered artists such as painter/poet/author/musician Billy Childish with folk duo The Singing Loins and poet/photographer/filmmaker Gerard Malanga and musician/writer/visual artist Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth in a squat in The Hague for the first Crossing the Border festival.

But it never became the ‘Crossing the Border’ festival. That’s where the typo comes in. When Behre had the first posters printed, somehow the word ‘the’ was dropped. Since there was no money to reprint, the festival became ‘Crossing Border.’ Today, to those people paying attention, the name signals that something’s going to be just a little bit different about this festival.

That first festival played to a sold-out squat. So the next year it moved onto stages. Today there are nine stages, 120 performers and four nights of events where literature, music, film and the visual arts mix in unique combinations. It is the largest spoken word event in Europe.

Cees Debets, managing director of the festival, remembers some of the previous performances. ‘When Henry Rollins was here in 1996, we had 700 people listening to him. Monica Ali introduced her book, Brick Lane, at Crossing Border. And with DBC Pierre, we’d heard rumours about his book and invited him here before he won the Booker Prize in 2003.

DBC Pierre will return this year to present the literary magazine To Hell. ‘From 7.30 to midnight we’ll have a bunch of musicians and writers working together. They inspire each other: Andrew O’Hagan, DBC Pierre, Sarah Hall, Richmond Fontaine, Brian Jonestown Massacre,’ says Debets. ‘We did the same thing with the n+1 literary magazine with Benjamin Kunkel who talked about writing and the world with his friends. It’s a bit like The Kitchen literary salon in New York.’

Two weeks before [his appearance at Crossing Border] he won the award and a BBC crew followed him to the festival.’

DBC Pierre will return this year to present the literary magazine To Hell. ‘From 7.30 to midnight we’ll have a bunch of musicians and writers working together. They inspire each other: Andrew O’Hagan, DBC Pierre, Sarah Hall, Richmond Fontaine, Brian Jonestown Massacre,’ says Debets. ‘We did the same thing with the n+1 literary magazine with Benjamin Kunkel who talked about writing and the world with his friends. It’s a bit like The Kitchen literary salon in New York.’

In 2001, Crossing Border presented a similar platform with McSweeney’s literary magazine with author Dave Eggers, along with a film by author Arthur Bradford. ‘The film had musical performances with mentally-handicapped people. Several of them were in the audience. David Byrne (Talking Heads) was also here and ended up performing with one of them.’

You WILL see/hear these people
So who are you going to see at Crossing Border this year – since you are going straight to the computer or phone to order your tickets, as soon as you finish reading this?

Crossing Border always features excellent music. Sinead O’Conner, Coldplay and 16 Horsepower have all headlined at the festival.

This year’s programme will open with Grammy Award-winner Cassandra Wilson, who released her Thunderbird CD in April, a collaboration with T Bone Burnett.

On Saturday night there will be concerts by Jhelisa Anderson, who got her start as a youngster singing gospel on the road in America’s South, and soul singer Bettye Lavette, who’s finishing up her first promo tour in 40 years. (The opening concert and Saturday’s concerts usually sell out – another reason to book now!)

Stuart A. Staples, former front man from the Tindersticks performed solo at the Roots of Heaven Festival in Haarlem last May. He’ll return to Holland at Crossing Border, as will Mark Eitzel and The American Music Club, the indie band out of San Francisco, who reunited after a decade’s break in 2004.
But, as mentioned before, it’s what the musicians do when they’re not making music that tends to steal the show. Jon Langford will not only perform at the festival in November, but he created the 2006 festival poster. ‘Langford is a real Crossing Border artist: a musician, writer, poet and painter,’ says Debets. The Welsh artist, who currently lives in Chicago, will present The Executioner’s Last Songs, a journey through time in music, starting with the punk scene (Langford founded the first-wave punk band, The Mekons, in the late 70s)

Crossing Border is different, not just for the audience, but for the performers. They sense that remarkable things go on at the festival and they want to help make them happen.

‘Once people have performed here, they ask to come back,’ says Debets. ‘Andy Cairns of rock band Therapy? played acoustic guitar with the band’s cello player, Martin McCarrick, here in 1999. So, a few months ago, we got an email from McCarrick. He said, ‘I was that cello player and my wife is a violin player. We do a live soundtrack with old films. I think it would fit in.’ We’ve invited them and we’ll see how it all works out.’

After the musical kick-off on Wednesday evening, each night of the festival will feature several stages with 45-minute interviews, performances and readings by the different artists. ‘We are a festival about literature and music and that’s what we try to show,’ says Debets. He tells about art rocker Lou Reed’s visit in 2004.

‘He came to read The Raven. He was nervous because this is not his core business. But he’d been inspired by the story.’ Indeed, in 2003 Reed had released a two-CD set called The Raven. ‘Then his partner, [experimental and performance artist] Laurie Anderson, came up on stage and had a dialogue with him.’

These are the moments that make up Crossing Border. ‘We try to make a mix. If it works, it’s magic,’ says Debets.

And these are the moments you just don’t want to miss. So you know what you have to do. Mark your agenda. Ring your friends. And book your tickets now for Crossing Border 2006. <

What the members say:

The Crossing Border website includes complete bios of all the performing artists. So if you have any doubt whether you will enjoy the wide range of performances, head online where you can listen to many of the musicians, decide if you want to read any of the writers’ works beforehand, or just get pumped for the upcoming events.

Getting tickets

Ticket sales began in early September, so get the lead out! Some events will sell out, like the opening concert with Cassandra Wilson and the Holmes Brothers and Saturday’s concerts with Bettye Lavette and Jhelisa Anderson. About two weeks before the festival, a complete schedule of performances will be available online. Don’t be daunted by the complicated mix. A festival wristband (€25 – 33 plus service charges) will let you in to enjoy everything, from 7pm – 1am.

Tickets are available via Ticketservice (in major post offices, GWK Travelex branches and local VVV tourist offices), at the Theatre aan het Spui box office, as well as from your usual ticket outlets. Telephone bookings can be made at Ticketlijn 0900-300 12 50 and internet sales are available through www.ticketservice.nl.

Getting There

The best bet is to take public transportation. The festival locations are just a ten-minute walk from The Hague’s Centraal Station, and night trains run to most major cities until after 2am. (Check www.ns.nl, www.ov9292.nl or phone 0900-92 92 for details.) Parking is limited around the festival, but if you do choose to drive, Theatre aan het Spui can sell discounted uitrĳkaarten (drive away tickets) for three underground car parks close to the Spuiplein. You can exchange your uitrĳkaart (car park ticket) for an uitrĳkaart (€5- 6.50), providing your original parking ticket was purchased after 7pm. (This is only available in the Parking Spui, Centrum and Turfmarkt/Schedeldoekshaven car parks.)

Crossing Border Festival
15 to 18 November 2006
Crossing Border takes place in The Hague’s cultural centre, on four stages at the Theatre aan het Spui and in surrounding festival tents on the Spuiplein.

Festival information line: 070-346 23 55
www.crossingborder.nl

Theater aan het Spui
Spui 187
The Hague
Tel: 070-346 52 72
www.theateraanhetspui.nl

Crossing Border also sponsors Border Kitchens, literary salons held throughout the year where small audiences (fewer than 70 people) converse with writers in an informal setting. Past Border Kitchens have included Jonathan Safran Foer, Paul Auster and Ruth Rendell, among others. Watch the website for dates and writers.