

Is the party over for smaller festivals?

Nick Harland explores how Yorkshire's music festivals have fared this year and the role that smaller events play in helping to shape the industry.

WE can all picture the scene. Standing in a field, surrounded by thousands of people, sun shining, drink in hand, watching our favourite band.

But that rose-tinted ideal of a music festival hasn't always played out that way in 2023, thanks to a combination of a wet summer, the cost-of-living crisis and the lingering impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data from the Association of Independent Festivals published earlier this year presents a bleak nationwide picture. It found that one in six festivals across the country came to an end during the pandemic or in the years that have followed.

In Yorkshire, No Bounds festival in Sheffield failed to go ahead this year, with organisers blaming the cost-of-living crisis for the cancellation – though a 2024 return is planned. Dance music event Newsam Park Festival in Leeds was also postponed over economic pressures, and the long-running Long Division in Wakefield came to an end after 12 years with organisers blaming 'faded' sponsorship and funding that had always heavily propped it up.

Meanwhile, Sheffield's Tramlines – one of the biggest festivals in the region – did go ahead in washout weather, but has faced calls to move to a new site after extensive damage to its Hillsborough Park home.

Still, some local festivals are defying the gloomy outlook. Live at Leeds has just celebrated its 17th year after successfully launching a new outdoor sister event last year (Live at Leeds In the Park), while Get Together Festival in Sheffield had to delay its planned launch in 2020, but has since expanded to a larger site in Kelham Island for its third year.

Float Along Festival in Sheffield was also supposed to debut in 2020, but you-know-what put paid to those plans. It eventually took place in 2022 and returned this year with a line-up showcasing some of the most exciting new artists from across the UK. Mark Dunn is the festival's founder and organiser. Having promoted live shows in the region over the last decade, he feels that music industry experience was vital for a

new, 'completely independent' event like Float Along to succeed.

"Our goal is clear: to provide a platform where you can discover your next favourite band while championing independent venues," he says. "Drawing from personal experience as regular gig, festival and live event-goers, it was really important to us to ensure all the venues were in close proximity to each other. Careful curation and programming were also crucial to ensure minimal clashes."

Multi-venue, inner city festivals like Float Along have their advantages over outdoor events. They can plug straight into the knowledge and infrastructure of existing live venues, with no need to build stages and sound systems from scratch. "On the day, an exceptional and experienced team supports the smooth running of the stages, as well as the incredible teams at the venues," says Mark. "Combined, they're a big part of the festival's magic."

Logistics aside, festival organisers like Mark are increasingly looking to offer more than just music to punters. Float Along combined its musical line-up with independent street food traders, talks from the likes of 6 Music DJ Steve Lamacq and an after-dark programme that went on late into the night.

Organisers even created an exclusive Floating Point festival beer in collaboration with the local Triple Point Brewery. Its innovations like these that convince festivalgoers they're getting value for money. At a time when finances are being stretched further than ever, that matters.

Another Sheffield festival, Get Together, expanded to Kelham Island for its third edition this summer. That meant a bigger capacity – but also the scope for a wider offering beyond music. Alongside its artist line-up, the festival featured art installations, tap takeovers at popular Kelham Island pubs and a pop-up record shop. Like Float Along, you could get a ticket to all this for a little over £30.

Meanwhile, in Leeds, one of the city's longest-running festivals Live at Leeds, follows a similar template to other Yorkshire success stories: a multi-venue set-up, a line-up with a focus on new music, and afford-



CHRISTOPHER TUDONG/GETTY IMAGES/JAMES HARRIS/REUTERS

CROWD PLEASER: Sheffield's Tramlines is one of the biggest festivals in the region. Inset, Leeds music promoter, Joe Hubbard.

able tickets. It has established itself as a national rite of passage for emerging UK acts.

One of the biggest reasons, perhaps, behind the success of such Yorkshire festivals, is a simple one – having the bravery to do something different. Take Float Along. Topping its bill were Irish post-punks The Murder Capital, who arguably released one of the most exhilarating albums of 2023, but wouldn't have been found headlining many festivals over the summer.

Get Together, meanwhile, featured the lesser-known brilliance of Hamish Hawk

(whose most-streamed song is about a Mauritanian badminton doubles champion), as well as the likes of CMAT, who self-deprecatingly describes herself as a "global pop star (who) no longer lives in Dublin with her grandparents".

Research from recording studios company Pirate earlier this year found the percentage of new acts performing at large UK festivals is falling each year, while small and medium-sized festival line-ups consistently evolve.

By taking the risks that bigger events are

afraid to take, smaller independent festivals like those in Yorkshire are playing a crucial role in the music industry. They act as a pipeline for the UK's major festivals, giving emerging artists a platform to show they're capable of headlining bigger events.

So if you do attend one of these Yorkshire success stories, remember this: the act you're watching may well turn up in a few years' time, in a field, with the sun shining, playing to thousands of people.

And they might even be your favourite band by then.



LEEDS MUSIC PROMOTER, JOE HUBBARD