

## FESTIVAL PASS



Haik Can Yasan

# Amsterdam Roots

The Dutch capital boasts a number of music festivals but none as long-standing, socially inclusive and friendly as Amsterdam Roots that takes place every summer. **Jo Frost** pays a visit and is impressed by its local-yet-global vibe

**A**msterdam has long been a favourite tourist destination, famous for its canals, bicycles and tulips. But the city, with a population of around 830,000, has become a victim of its own charms and is now suffering from over-tourism, with 19 million visitors descending on the capital last year. Thankfully the Amsterdam Roots festival lies off the well-trodden tourist trail but it's certainly an excellent reason and time to visit.

Originally called the African Roots Festival, its first edition was in 1983 when Frans Goossens, a programmer at Melkweg, a former milk factory and a cultural institution in Amsterdam, had the idea to set up a festival in the city. In 1987 the first Amsterdam Roots Meeting was held, followed by the World Roots Festival with various partners involved such as the Holland Festival, Tropentheater and the Concertgebouw. The aim was to bring the big names in world music – such as Fela Kuti, Los Van Van, Salif Keita, Nass

El Ghiwane – to Europe. Eventually, in 1998, it was rebranded and has since been known as the Amsterdam Roots festival.

As with many city-based festivals, concerts take place in a variety of venues, which over the years have included the Tropentheater, Concertgebouw, Melkweg and Paradiso. But one constant over the last 20 or so years has been the concerts on the Sunday that take place in Oosterpark, located in the east of the city. It's become the festival hub and location of the final day's festivities – a free event that attracts up to 20,000 people. Oosterpark also happens to be home to the National Slavery Monument that commemorates the freedom of the Surinamese from slavery in 1863. There's a sizeable population of Surinamese in Amsterdam and every year on July 1 the Ketikoti (Broken Chains) festival takes place, so when Amsterdam Roots moves into the park several days later, the wreaths and flowers are still in evidence around the monument.

Current festival director and music programmer is Danka van Dodewaard who has been involved in several new initiatives and overseen various changes to the festival's format. "For me it's very important that we are a festival with a message," she says. "Young audiences are looking for more than just amusement. It's important to pay attention to our cultural heritage, to our identity – local but also the world. To know your history and your roots is still very, very important."

"We used to only have international bands, otherwise the audiences felt it wasn't exotic or interesting enough. But now our mission is about cultural identity, we don't have to look so far to find very interesting artists. Amsterdam is a very diverse city."

One of the new initiatives this year was a special showcase for a small group of international delegates to experience a Dutch-focused programme that included Shakuar – a new electro-folk-soul project featuring Shishani

Vranckx and Karima el Fillali. This took place in Doka, a cool basement bar within the Volkshotel, a former newspaper headquarters. This is one of half a dozen venues, including Bimhuis, the super-stylish jazz venue that juts out into the waterfront where Luedji Luna from Brazil made her European premiere and Sarathy Korwar and his band showcased music from his latest album, *More Arriving*.

Amid the beautiful surroundings of Oosterpark – one of Amsterdam's largest green spaces – are various stages, including an intimate indoor stage within the restored chapel of Hotel Arena, a former 19th-century orphanage built within the park. This year the so-called Stardust stage featured several acts including Sabir Khan, a *sarangi* player who collaborated with Dutch *tabla* player Heiko Dijker and Sinan Arat, a Turkish *ney* player who now lives in the Netherlands.

With the festival's week-long duration and the number of venues, van Dodewaard concedes that its strength and weakness is that it is so diverse: "The audience who goes to Bimhuis and the concerts we present there are different to those who go to Oosterpark. So we have to speak a lot of languages to reach everybody – but I don't want to change that. It's a lot of work but it's important. It's not just about art, it's very important that the audience does not only get inspired by what they see on stage but also change the way they look at themselves and the world; we want to give them something to think about and we want it to be socially inclusive – it's a hot topic right now, but it's been very important for us since the beginning of the festival."

Besides the music programme, there are also films, panel discussions, social circus acts and theatre. "It's a way to give more perspectives on these stories that should be told. New stories, old stories, different to the



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Clockwise from main image: Brazilian singer Luedji Luna making her European debut; Santrofi from Ghana; one of the many food stalls in the park; Oosterpark's National Slavery Monument; Shakuar playing in Doka



Jo Frost

ones we hear all day long on the news," explains van Dodewaard.

Despite worries that the locals might stay away from the park on the Sunday and instead watch the Dutch football team who were playing the US in FIFA's women's world cup final, there was still a sizeable crowd gathered in Oosterpark. "People from the neighbourhood come to the festival who normally never go to cultural events," says van Dodewaard. "It's very important for me that they feel welcome." Proceedings kick off in the afternoon, across four stages with a variety of food, arts and crafts stalls. By the middle of the afternoon the park is teeming with groups of friends and families having picnics, joining in the workshops and dancing to bands, such as local Surinamese rising star A Mili, the new hot band from Ghana, Santrofi, and the all-female Gnawa group, Asmaa Hamzaoui &

Bnat Timbouktou (read more about them on p19). It has the friendly vibe of a local community fête but with a top quality international music programme. "We are one of the few festivals who combine high standard of performances with such diverse audiences," says van Dodewaard proudly.

One of the highlights of this year's music programme was the Canadian singer and pianist, Jeremy Dutcher. "I saw Jeremy in Mundial Montréal in Canada last year and I was really blown away by his performance and also his story, which really suits our festival. I took a really big risk because nobody knows him here but I really wanted him in the festival – his Dutch premiere. I want to inspire the audiences with things they have never seen, with interesting stories. I want to give artists the chance to make a first step in the Netherlands." ♦

✦ **DATES** Next year's Amsterdam Roots festival takes place from June 23-28 2020  
✦ **ONLINE** [www.amsterdamroots.nl](http://www.amsterdamroots.nl)