



USA TODAY Pop Candy: Unwrapping pop culture's hip and hidden treasures by Whitney Matheson

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Jul 07, 2010

Guest blogger: Another summer, another Latvian music festival

02:12 PM

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Note: Whitney is on vacation until July 12. Pop Candy readers are contributing to the blog while she's away.

By Anna Hanks

Going to a music festival in Salacgriva, Latvia, three years in a row is so absurd, even I don't really believe I'm doing it. Yet, come July 16-17, I'll again be someplace I never expected to visit. For me, absurdity and Latvia go together like ... classically trained musicians performing catchy pop tunes while dressed as pandas.

During the 2009 [Positivus Festival](#), I was entranced by the group [Instrumenti](#), who wore large, cartoonish panda heads. During their set, the pandas were joined by various winsome characters, from a furry owl to a nearly naked tiger. The pandas finished their show by having additional pandas rappel onto the stage. Sure, I'd heard their "big-in-the-Baltics" hit, *Life Jacket Under Your Seat*, the previous summer, but I had no idea how much I'd like the all-singing, all-dancing, all-panda band:

I shouldn't be surprised seeing performing pandas at a seaside music festival in Latvia. Latvia is a strange, small and quaint place that used to be part of the Soviet Union. Its approximately 2.25 million citizens are now members of the European Union.

It's hard to expect normalcy from a country where the soup is often pink, the bread black, and the natives -- at least my Latvian friends -- are capable of drinking you under the table. Some of them are even capable of downing the local "Riga Black Balsam" -- a thick, black, bitter liquor which is rumored to be good for fixing anything that's wrong with you except your computer problems.

I have a theory that the general absurdity in Latvia can be traced to the vast difference in the amount of sunlight the place gets during different seasons. In the winter, the sun hardly bothers coming up. Summertime, it's daylight practically 24/7, though that sunlight doesn't make it warm. I've shivered on a Latvian beach in July, where everyone around me was happy in swimsuits.

You might wonder how I ended up watching performing pandas in Salacgriva's Soviet-era park, whose rusting decorations are clearly left over from the excitement of the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

I briefly worked for *The Baltic Times*, an English-language weekly covering the Baltic States. In 2006, I wrote an article on the South by Southwest visit of Latvian singer-songwriter **Goran Gora** for *TBT*, and inadvertently bonded with members of "Team Goran." Impulsively, I invited them to stay with me the next time they came to Austin. By SXSW 2010, we had seven Latvians staying at our tiny house, including the pandas of Instrumenti.

It doesn't hurt that my Latvian journalist friend Dace Volfa has managed to wrangle me an all-access pass at Positivus each year, as well as unorthodox sleeping arrangements. For the last two years, we've crashed overnight in the abandoned headliner dressing "rooms" after the big-name acts have cleared out. Being backstage in the Baltics has led to more interesting experiences than being backstage at Austin music festivals. The time I met **Fatboy Slim** backstage at Positivus, I was so sick with an ear infection that I was concentrating awfully hard on not throwing up on his shoes.

Wandering around backstage last year, I was pressed into service. While many people in the Baltics speak English, often



they aren't confident of their language skills. That can make for awkwardly quiet English-language press conferences.

Being a native English speaker, I was asked if I'd be willing to interview **Sinéad O'Connor** during her press conference. After Tweeting my good fortune, I had the surreal experience of spending several hours in a damp bathing suit preparing for an interview using a Latvian computer keyboard with extra Latvian letters. Sadly, O'Connor didn't have time for the interview.

I also asked if it were possible for my friend to sit in on **Moby's** press conference, since he's a fan. When the press person learned that he teaches at Tallinn University's Baltic Film and Media School, she wanted to know if he might be willing to conduct the interview. Of course! (And since he looks a bit like Moby -- bald with glasses -- he was even used as a "decoy" to distract photographers on Moby's brief walk to the Q&A.)



As strange as it might seem, I'm glad I'm making my annual pilgrimage to the Positivus Festival. With the **Scissor Sisters** and **Muse** headlining this year, who knows what kind of craziness I might see? Besides, nearly everyone I know in Latvia will be there.

Anna Hanks writes for Austinist and tweets as @annainaustin. You can read more from her at www.anna-hanks.com.

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[sarcasticHalli](#) (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 7/8/2010 12:47:55 PM
Darling Anna,

Give Jake Shears an inappropriate hug for me ;).

Cheers--

Halli

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Imariemcd (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 7/8/2010 9:48:20 AM
Sveika Anna!

Thank you for writing about Latvia. I have been there a couple of times and the place is truly magical. Have fun at the festival.

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narada (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 7/8/2010 5:33:19 AM
Positivus is the best music festival in and around the Baltic states !! :) And the place is magical !
Next weekend I'll be there !! Believe when I say - it is worth to be there !!

Dr.Doom is leader of the Marvel Universe nation of Latveria.. ;)

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rmirth (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 7/7/2010 10:57:24 PM
Wish I could go - I love Muse and have a thing for tiny Baltic nations - Positivus sounds fun. Enjoyed the post.

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- A J - (1 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 7/7/2010 3:07:08 PM
Hmmm, interesting.
Wait..Latvia...isn't Dr Doom from there?
Never would have thought he likes the panda rock!
:)

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