

For two days every August, the elegant gardens and groves of the Parc de Saint-Cloud are transformed into a mecca for rock fans. Beck and Morcheeba are among the many big names to have headlined Rock-en-Seine.

# : ROCK IN PARIS

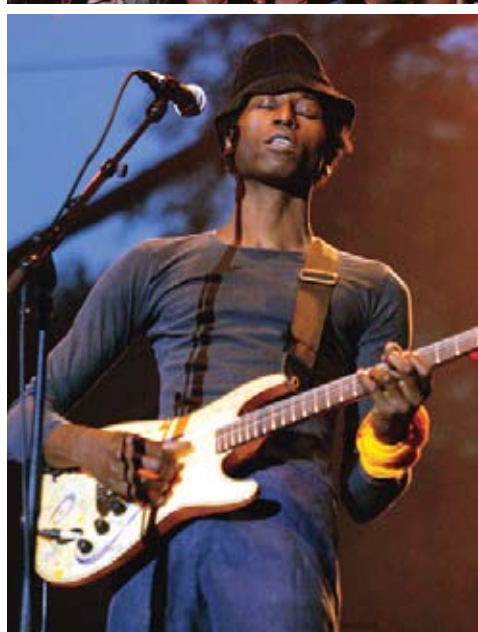
by HEATHER STIMMLER-HALL

DON'T LET THEIR BAFFLING ADULATION OF JOHNNY Hallyday or their penchant for electronic music fool you. The French can rock. And now they have mega rock festivals to prove it. The largest, Vieilles Charrues, draws some 170,000 fans to Brittany every spring. In the Paris area, Rock-en-Seine is the biggest ticket, luring some 43,000 fans away from the bright lights of the capital.

Rock-en-Seine debuted during the infamous heat wave of August 2003 as a one-day event with an impressive lineup of 11 bands including Beck, PJ Harvey, Massive Attack and Morcheeba. By 2005 it had grown into a two-day festival with 30 bands performing on three stages. The headliners alone—the Chemical Brothers, the White Stripes, Muse, Sonic Youth, Foo Fighters, the Pixies, Franz Ferdinand, Robert Plant and Queens of the Stone Age—are worth the trip, but it's the stunning location that makes Rock-en-Seine unforgettable.

The event takes place in the Domaine National de Saint-Cloud, a.k.a. the Parc de Saint-Cloud, in the affluent suburbs west of Paris. For rock 'n' roll fans used to sports stadiums or barren fields in the middle of nowhere, it's almost too nice. Even jaded Parisians are duly impressed. The park was once part of the 17th-century Château de Saint-Cloud, built by Philippe d'Orléans, brother of Sun King Louis XIV, and subsequently embellished by Marie-Antoinette and emperors Napoleon I and III. The château didn't survive the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, but its vast gardens, statues, groves and fountains, designed by the illustrious landscape architect Le Nôtre (whose humble résumé includes the gardens of Versailles and Vaux-le-Vicomte), were preserved and declared a National Heritage Site in 1994.

It may seem appallingly inappropriate to host a rock festival on historic grounds usually reserved for genteel strolls and Sunday picnics. But in its heyday before the French Revolution, the Domaine de Saint-Cloud was the scene of legendary masked balls and fireworks festivals where bewigged Parisian aristocrats would let their hair down, literally and figuratively. In typical rock 'n' roll fashion, it was also the location of many scandalous events including the assassination





of Henri III in 1589 and General Bonaparte's coup d'état in 1799. Rock-en-Seine's organizers celebrated this confluence of past and present with their 2005 festival logo, which featured black-and-white portraits of Marie-Antoinette and Napoleon I on a red background, each with a black star over one eye à la KISS (or Marilyn Manson, depending on your generation).

The name Rock-en-Seine is a play on words—a favorite French pastime—and is pronounced like *Rock en Scène*, or “Rock on Stage.” Literally, the name means “Rock on the Seine,” referring to the location of the festival grounds on the edge of the famous river that runs through Paris. But with tall fencing erected for the occasion, the only glimpse of water that concertgoers get is when they cross the bridge between the Métro and the festival entrance, which is located to the left of an ugly modern office complex. To the right, a church spire on the hillside marks what's left of the historic town center of Saint-Cloud; there, a few bistros, bakeries and a supermarket offer a convenient place to stop for a bite or stock up on supplies.

After enduring long lines and a security shakedown (for contraband like glass bottles and camera equipment), eager rock fans are given a complimentary pair of earplugs and a map with the schedule of concerts. This all-important document is carefully studied and kept on hand by those in the know. With 30 concerts spread over three stages and two days, the key to getting the most mileage out of Rock-en-Seine is to be in the right place at the right time.

**A GRASSY EXPANSE** of lawns, tree-lined paths and a considerable number of concession stands separate the three stages. The largest one, La Grande Scène, is a good 10-minute hike from the second, La Scène de la Cascade, named for Le Nôtre's impressive cascading fountain nearby. A smaller Scène de l'Industrie, tucked off to the side, is reserved for local French bands. The concerts begin at 3 P.M. and are

**THE 2005 FESTIVAL LOGO** featured black-and-white portraits of Marie-Antoinette and Napoleon I on a red background, each with a black star over one eye à la KISS.

thoughtfully staggered by at least 10 minutes to allow the more ambitious (and fleet-footed) fans the chance to hear a little bit of each.

The forested hills of the park create a natural amphitheater, and after dark the trees sparkle with thousands of tiny white fairy lights, making for a more intimate atmosphere than the customary floodlights of stadium concerts. Those who are interested in seeing only the headlining bands that play later in the evening spend most of the afternoon lounging on the grass under the trees or browsing the stands. Some of the rock-themed diversions include an air-guitar karaoke stage, the top music videos of the year projected onto giant screens and an open-air art exhibition. In 2005 there were oversized photographs by Philippe Levy of rock icons such as Iggy Pop, Kurt Cobain, Neil Young, Daft Punk and Michael Stipe of REM. Freebies are handed out early in the afternoon, including 80,000 CDs featuring a compilation of the local French bands performing on the Scène de l'Industrie, known collectively as Les Avants Seine.

Presented for the first time in 2005 with the financial support of the Ile-de-France region, Les Avants Seine is an opportunity for relatively unknown French rock groups to perform alongside some of the



biggest acts of the moment. This is important if a French rock band ever wants to headline at Rock-en-Seine. For now, their efforts to market themselves internationally reach only a very dedicated audience, despite their English-sounding names and lyrics. At the 2005 Rock-en-Seine press conference, no one from Foo Fighters or Franz Ferdinand could name a single contemporary French rock band. “Are there any?” joked Dave Grohl, almost certainly to the chagrin of those performing at the same festival.

Whether the bands of Les Avants Seine expand their fan base or not, their presence alone adds a bit of Indie spirit to the otherwise mainstream event. It also quells some of the criticism from French music journalists that the festival is simply a money-making machine. Many French rock fans still embrace the genre's anti-establishment roots. The only other rock festivals in the Paris region, Fête de l'Humanité and Solidays, are nonprofit concerts held to raise money for popular causes such as AIDS relief or hunger in developing nations. Inherently political in nature, they feature performers who take advantage of their captive audience to rant against the evils of capitalism, war, American imperialism or French bureaucracy. But these festivals don't attract the same echelon of international talent that Rock-en-Seine's big checkbook does (duly reflected in the ticket price). Not that Rock-en-Seine is totally devoid of politics: Last year, a few home-grown bands couldn't resist



In 2005, huge crowds turned out to hear the Foo Fighters with their trademark mix of loud, heavy guitar riffs and pretty melodies.

getting in a few jabs about “Sarko,” referring to the controversial interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy. A

few cheers escaped the predominantly French crowd, but there was also a lot of eye-rolling. “Whatever,” said Philippe Demoulin, a concertgoer from Limoges. “We just came for the music.”

And when it comes to music, everyone at Rock-en-Seine speaks the same language. The sight of tens of thousands of fans pressed up close to the stage, dancing with their hands in the air and singing along to their favorite songs, is pretty much what you’d see at your typical American music festival. People of all ages and nationalities come to Rock-en-Seine, but the majority of the crowd is made up of twentysomething Parisians. When the heavier bands start to play, those closest to the stage get swept up in a sweaty mosh pit, with eyeglasses, plastic cups and toes getting crushed in the frenzy.

The fun ends at about 11:30 P.M., which seems downright early (except perhaps for the actual residents of Saint-Cloud), but concertgoers heading to the Métro need quite a bit of time to catch the last crowded trains into Paris (at 12:45 A.M.). The lucky few who reserve a spot at the festival campsite (see sidebar) get to continue the open-air party until the wee hours, with DJ music at the campsite bar until 3 A.M. But the party doesn’t have to end for those staying in Paris. There is no shortage of bars and clubs open until dawn, and rock fans should check out the areas around the Métro Grands Boulevards (2nd), rue Oberkampf (11th) and place Pigalle (18th).

# ROCK-EN-SEINE 2006

THE BASICS



**TICKETS** The tentative dates are August 25-26. Keep an eye on the official Web site ([rockenseine.com](http://rockenseine.com)) for updates on the bands as they’re

confirmed. Caveat emptor: The lineup can change at the last minute. Tickets may be purchased either on-site (€40 in 2005) or in advance (€36 in 2005). A limited number of two-day passes (€60 in 2005) are sold only in advance.

**CAMPING** To reserve a spot at the campsite (€20 per two-person tent in 2005), purchase your two-day pass first (required), then sign up for camping space on the Web site. You must print out the confirmation and present it at the entrance along with your tickets. You’ll need your own tent and sleeping bag, and a foam mat if you’re not keen on sleeping on the hard ground. Continental breakfast is provided. Food and drink can be brought in, but no cooking equipment or glass (check the Web site for new rules on cans, which may be banned in 2006). Spaces are assigned, and only those with campsite bracelets are allowed on the premises.

**GETTING THERE** From Paris, take Métro line 10 to the last station, Boulogne-Pont de Saint-Cloud. From Gare St-Lazare (9th), take the SNCF Transilien train to the Gare de Saint-Cloud. From the Arc de Triomphe, take Bus 52 to the end of the line (Pont de Saint-Cloud; last return to Paris is at 11 P.M.). To reserve a taxi, call 01/46-02-90-60, but keep in mind that few are available late at night.

If you drive, follow the signs to the parking lot inside the Domaine National de Saint-Cloud. The fee is €3.50 per car, and the lot is closed from 1 A.M. to 7 A.M. There is a 15-minute walk through the park to the festival entrance. Those with one-day passes cannot leave the festival and return, so don’t leave anything in your car that you may need later.

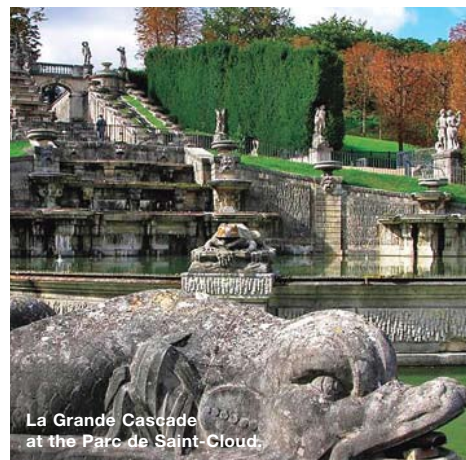
**BAGGAGE CHECK** There is a free baggage check, but cameras and recording equipment are not allowed at the festival.

**WHAT TO BRING** August can be cool, rainy or unbearably hot, so plan accordingly. Recommended items include bottled water (last year there was nowhere to refill them), a hat and sunscreen, sturdy shoes in case of mud and to protect toes (although a spare pair of flip-flops won’t weigh you down) and a cheap rain parka. You may also want a foam pad or even a plastic trash bag to sit on if it’s damp. After dark, it can be quite chilly, so pack a sweater (or buy a concert sweatshirt, about €30). Hand wipes or tissues can come in handy for those unfortunately necessary trips to the port-a-potty.

**FOOD & DRINK** The concession stands sell typical French festival fare ranging from hamburgers and crêpes to paninis and even sausage and sauerkraut dishes. A full meal and a beverage costs about €10. Those who want to save money or avoid lines should pack a few snacks that won’t

easily crush or melt. Beer and wine are available (€3 to €6), as are soft drinks and bottled water. There were no water fountains in 2005.

**MORE ROCK** If you’d like to sample other French rock festivals, try Solidays ([solidarite-sida.org](http://solidarite-sida.org)), the Fête de l’Humanité ([humanite.fr](http://humanite.fr)), the Festival des Vieilles Charrues ([vieillescharrues.asso.fr](http://vieillescharrues.asso.fr)) or Eurockéennes ([eurockeenness.fr](http://eurockeenness.fr)).



La Grande Cascade at the Parc de Saint-Cloud.