

# Tallinn Music Week, Estonia

*Kate Wellham*

'Nobody's impressed by swearing', my teacher used to say, when the class poet presented the latest installment of the alphabet he was learning in four-letter chunks.

That teacher was wrong.

Right now, I am very impressed by swearing, and so are the 200ish smartly-dressed Estonians in this room. This particular swearing is so impressive that there are cameras here to make sure that those who can't make it to the swearing in person don't miss it.

You see, it turns out it's the presentation of the swearing that makes it impressive, and who does the swearing, rather than the swearing itself.

If you're the President of Estonia, and you're swearing on Twitter at a writer from the New York Times, who has held your country up as an example of economic failure when you think you're doing quite well, then that's the kind of swearing that's going to impress some people. Others maybe not so much.

But even those unimpressed by that original swearing would still be impressed by its presentation this evening as part of a [Financial opera](#), belted out by a glorious opera singer with orchestral accompaniment, in a beautiful hall in Tallinn.

The New York Times piece was, it's explained to me, only the latest example of Estonia's being dictated to by the West, and one that the President wasn't going to take lying down. His fury made the news as well as a libretto.

But if I were him, there are other places I might start with the backlash - like the talent show on TV in a quiet bar in Tallinn's medieval Old Town.

The contestants are brought out one by one to mimic pop stars in front of the three judges and studio audience, a format we're unfortunately used to. We watch MC Hammer, Shakira, and - no word of a lie - a middle-aged man dressed as Stevie Wonder. We have suspicions that he is blacked up; suspicions which have deepened (along with his skin tone, it appears) by the time of his post-performance interview. I'd probably decommission that.

A few streets away, a McDonalds has punched well above its weight, being housed in one of the decorative pink pastel stone buildings inside the Old Town walls. Far superior local outlet Hessburger is just outside the walls, in a building that looks a bit like a bus shelter. Maybe I'd swap those.

Perhaps I'd even close the pirate theme bar where staff in costume sell thick black booze to already drunk British stag parties. Actually maybe I'd leave that, at least you know where they are.

If it sounds like I'm down on Tallinn, nothing could be further from the truth. It just happens that the only things I don't enjoy seeing during my visit to Tallinn Music Week are those things that have been incongruously imported to a place with such a fascinating landscape - literally and culturally - that it makes me want to tweet abuse at Ronald McDonald. It's an occupation too far.

Luckily, Tallinn Music Week itself is almost completely devoid of such cultural bulldozing. We'll overlook that the boyband-handsome singer from Facelift Deer won Estonian Idol (a real thing), because the band style it out by playing actual instruments, properly, in a real venue.

And it's to their credit that After The Ice are succeeding so hard at pretending to be a Hendrix side-project circa '69 that they're actually playing in a venue called Woodstock. It's even ok that the Woodstock venue is so confused that downstairs it's actually a red-walled, smoke-filled rock bar downstairs with pictures of Black Sabbath all over it. The enthusiasm is winning.

So why Tallinn? With all the Sound Cities, Great Escapes and South By South Wests giving plenty of opportunity to catch an early wave of bands to be breaking on our shores in the coming months, what's here for your Brit-based festival-hopper?

I rack my brains to answer this question all the way through a pre-gig meal at Gloria, but the food is so good it's distracting, and the extravagant 1930s decor isn't helping either. I walk all the way up to the top of the Old Town to find answers, but all I can see is the sea framed by spires and the KGB museum.

I'm still trying to think of reasons later, as I wander through the medieval cobbled streets in the falling snow, trying to choose which of the softly glowing underground bars to pass an hour in before the next gig (probably some experimental Finnish band I'll fall in love with and never get to see back home anyway).

Having chosen a tiny bar, I try to come up with a good reason you should come here for an entire hour, while drinking fruity Estonian ale by candlelight. I can't really think of one, you'll just have to trust me.

I've heard of a handful of the artists at this event, no more, and that's how I like it. No running around from one predetermined must-see to the next, but a leisurely wander between must-sees that become apparent only as we see them. The only thing that makes it difficult to keep up with what I have and haven't seen is the refreshing lack of any kind of constructed image for most of these bands. 'What are you wearing for the gig tonight?', 'I was going to go with clothes again, why?'

There probably are a lot of buzz bands here, if you're Finnish or Russian or Lithuanian, and maybe these are the names that have brought you here. But if, like me, you can't even begin to pronounce a lot of those names, this programme looks less like a clash dash and more like the musical holiday from the familiar. They say that familiarity breeds contempt, and I can buy that.

There's a substantial and well deserved buzz among the small British contingent here about TRAAMS, but I'm otherwise clueless. I choose my schedule for the weekend by browsing through the pictures and descriptions for anything that sounds brilliant, funny or strange. Grown man called Kello Hitty playing recycled toys? In Leeds, hell no. But here, why the hell not?

With few preconceptions about the bill, venue-hopping is as good a way as any to get around. There's the beautiful Kino Sopro cinema and venue, where I rediscover a lost and forgotten patience watching subtle multinational MaiNekk blossom onstage over the course of half an hour or so.

Estonian superstar IIRIS breaks her pop mould to sing the darkly poetic Swan Bone City with the Tallinn Chamber Orchestra at the grand Mustpeade Maja Valge Saal - for most people here, a spectacle I can only imagine is like seeing Martine McCutcheon pop up in the next David Lynch.

Von Krahl is the unofficial centre of the festival. With two stages and a bolt-hole for visiting delegates, it's such a good base that it keeps me around long enough to catch and love the thunderous Elephants From Neptune and math rockers Without Letters.

Perhaps my favourite set is one that isn't even on the bill. A group of five or six men who look like bouncers (and one who looks like Dara O'Brien) shuffle into the log cabin restaurant where delegates are having a goodbye lunch before many fly home. The men gather quietly together at the bar, turn to face us, and burst into awesome song.

This is the Georgian choir who, having played earlier in the festival, have come to surprise us and to surprise festival organiser Helen Sildna, who wells up obligingly. When one of the members of the choir hears that among his very appreciative audience here is a former Pink Floyd manager, he looks like he's about to well up too.

Rattling around the streets on my final night, I'm so busy gawping at the crazy mess of buildings and genuine Soviet grannies trundling between them that I lose my way completely. A group of three exuberant locals - two guys and a girl - adopt me and offer to show me back to my hotel.

Introducing themselves as 'the enemy' (Estonian-born Russians), and they're so delighted that I'm British that they buy me a blueberry muffin from that infernal McDonalds on the way back. Dropping me at my hotel, they tell me that all I need to do in return is say 'twelve months' out loud, for their inexplicable amusement. So I tell them that I've had such a good time here that I'll

be back in twelve months. They almost collapse laughing. Then they tell me it's that 'twelve months' sounds like Estonian for 'cock is good'. and wish me a safe journey home.

'Nobody is impressed by swearing', said my teacher. Bullshit.



