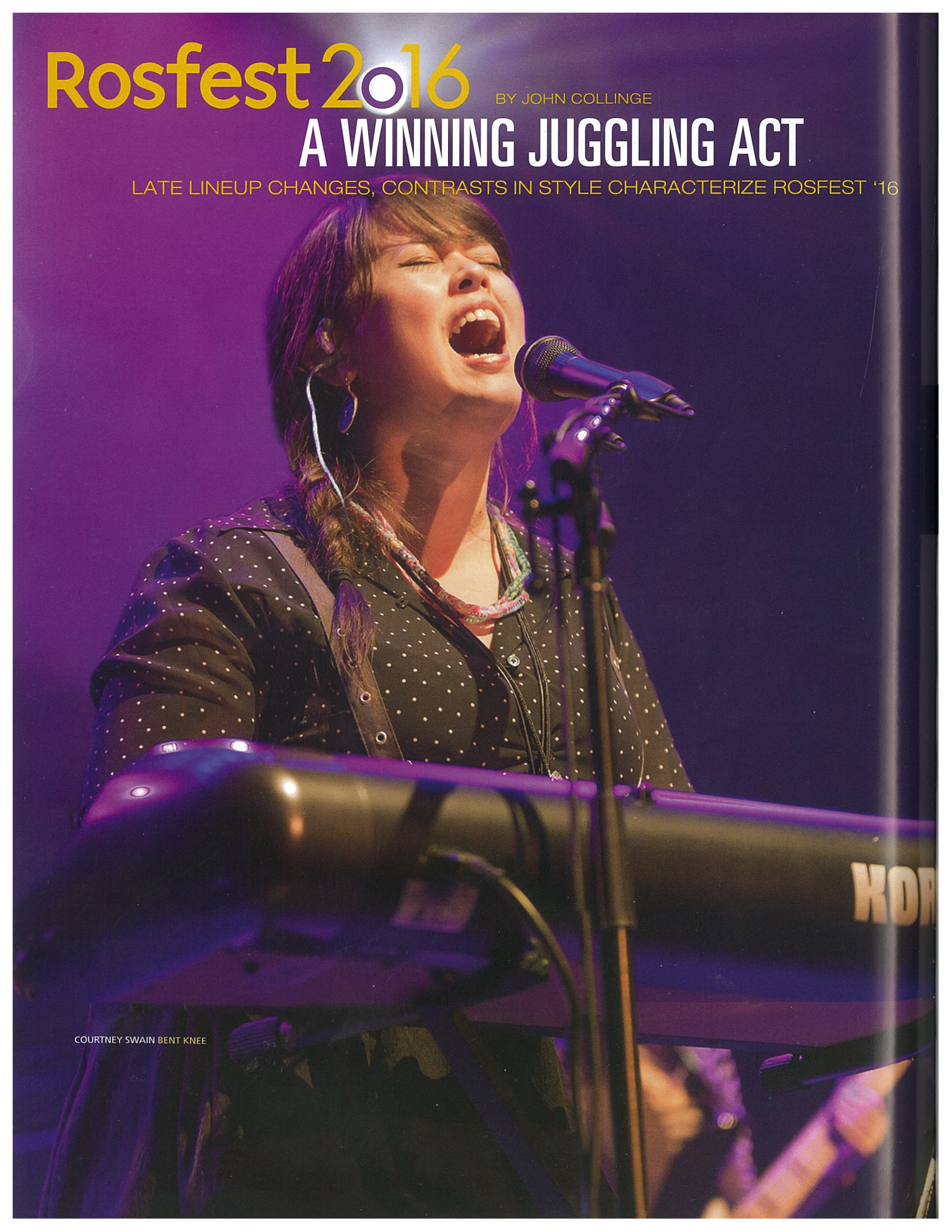


Rosfest 2016

BY JOHN COLLINGE

A WINNING JUGGLING ACT

LATE LINEUP CHANGES, CONTRASTS IN STYLE CHARACTERIZE ROSFEST '16

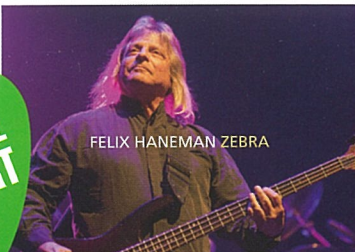


COURTNEY SWAIN BENT KNEE

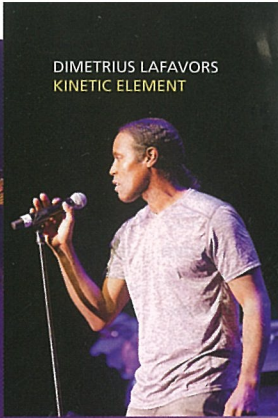
LIVE
FESTIVAL
REPORT



RYO OKUMOTO
SPOCK'S BEARD



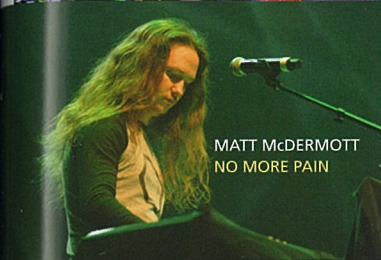
FELIX HANEMAN ZEBRA



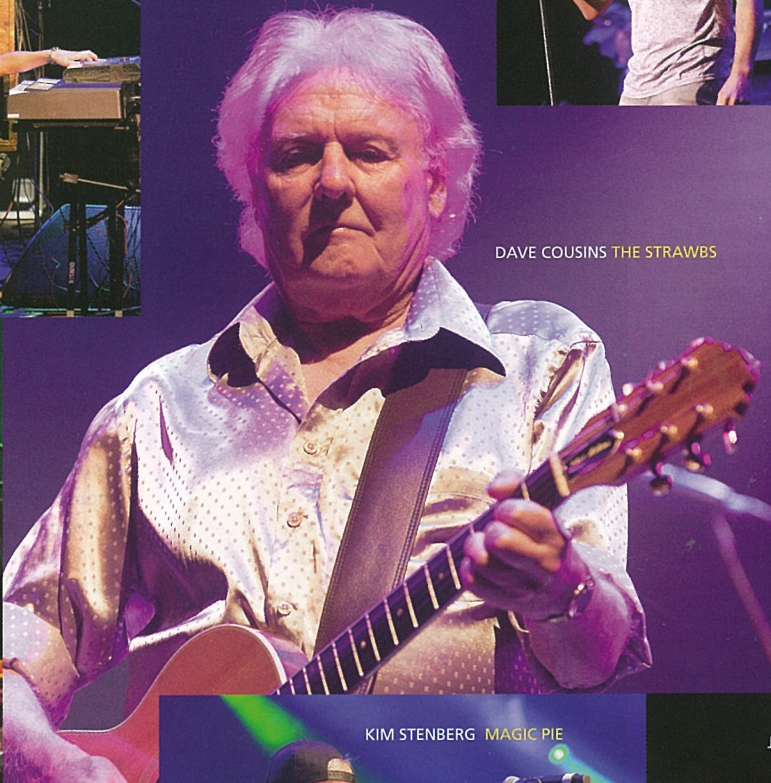
DIMETRIUS LAFAVORS
KINETIC ELEMENT



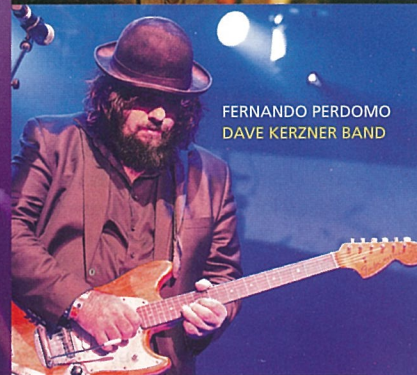
NICK D'VIRGILIO
THE FRINGE



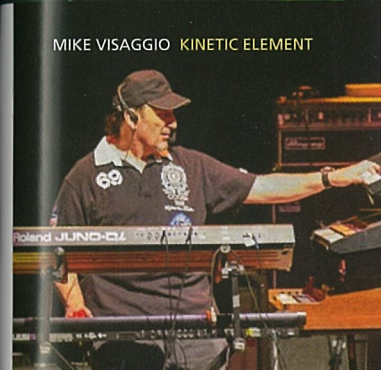
MATT McDERMOTT
NO MORE PAIN



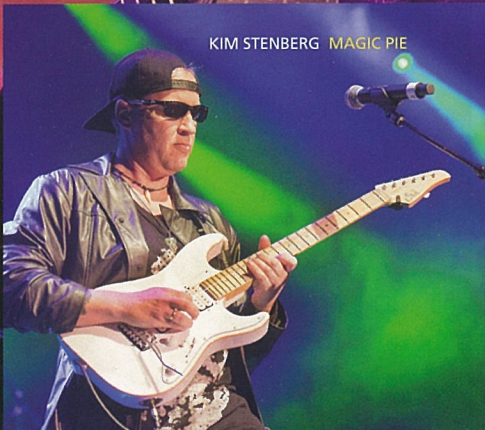
DAVE COUSINS THE STRAWBS



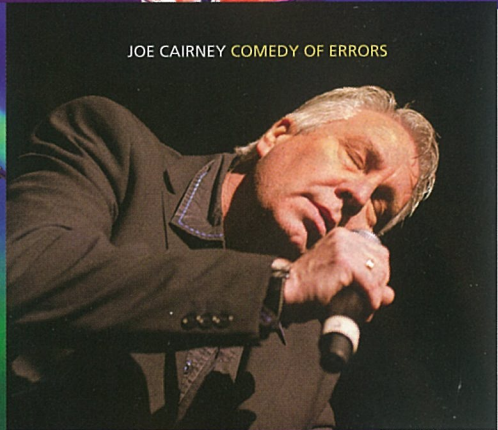
FERNANDO PERDOMO
DAVE KERZNER BAND



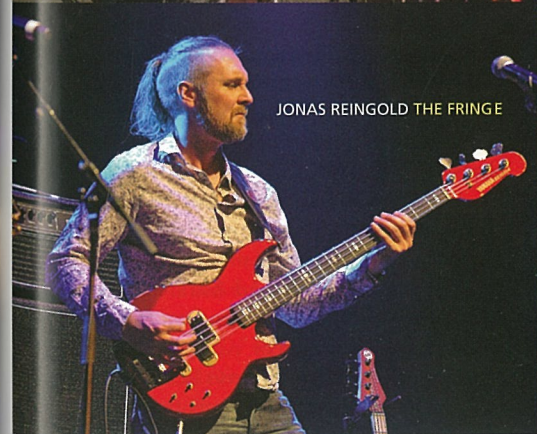
MIKE VISAGGIO KINETIC ELEMENT



KIM STENBERG MAGIC PIE



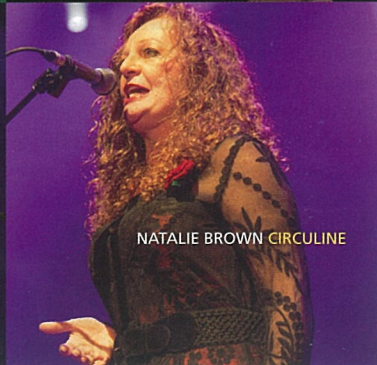
JOE CAIRNEY COMEDY OF ERRORS



JONAS REINGOLD THE FRINGE



DAVE KERZNER
DAVE KERZNER BAND



NATALIE BROWN CIRCULINE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER FISHER
AND LINDA SHULMAN



The annual **Rites of Spring Festival** in Gettysburg, Pa. typically runs like clockwork and for the most part its 13th edition, May 6–8, delivered as expected. That is, despite the death of Riverside band guitarist Piotr Grudzinski causing fill-in Spock's Beard to headline Saturday, while The Strawbs' late arrival pushed them from Friday night's showcase slot to a Sunday afternoon cameo. >



Even the best-laid plans can and do go haywire, as event organizer George Roldan drolly attests. “We printed up T-shirts with The Strawbs on them, we printed up posters with The Strawbs on them. And if you lose a band all of a sudden it’s like, ‘Wow, that band didn’t play there.’ It’s not easy to replace headliners.

“In this business I’ve learned you must have backup plans in place. People expect us to put a good product out there; they expect something sensational onstage,” he said. “Dealing with these kinds of things is the nature of the beast.”

Dealing well enough, in this case, to ensure another year in what now is the world’s longest-running indoor progressive music festival. Roldan’s proverbial “beast” returns to downtown Gettysburg’s 850-seat Majestic Theater next May 5–7. Performers confirmed so far: Sunday headliner Anglagard (Sweden), The Fierce and the Dead (U.K.) plus American groups Unified Past, The Aaron Clift Experiment and the Neal Morse Band (Saturday’s headliner). More will be announced in coming months.

After late changes this year’s lineup proceeded thusly: Kinetic Element (U.S.) opened Friday night followed by Magic Pie (Norway). Saturday convened U.S. groups No More Pain, Circuline, Dave Kerzner Band and Spock’s Beard. Performing Sunday: international ensemble The Fringe, The Strawbs (U.K.), Bent Knee (U.S.), Comedy of Errors (Scotland) and Zebra (U.S.). After-hours revelry at the Aspire Gettysburg Hotel included shows by U.S. acts 3rDegree and Out of the Beardspace.

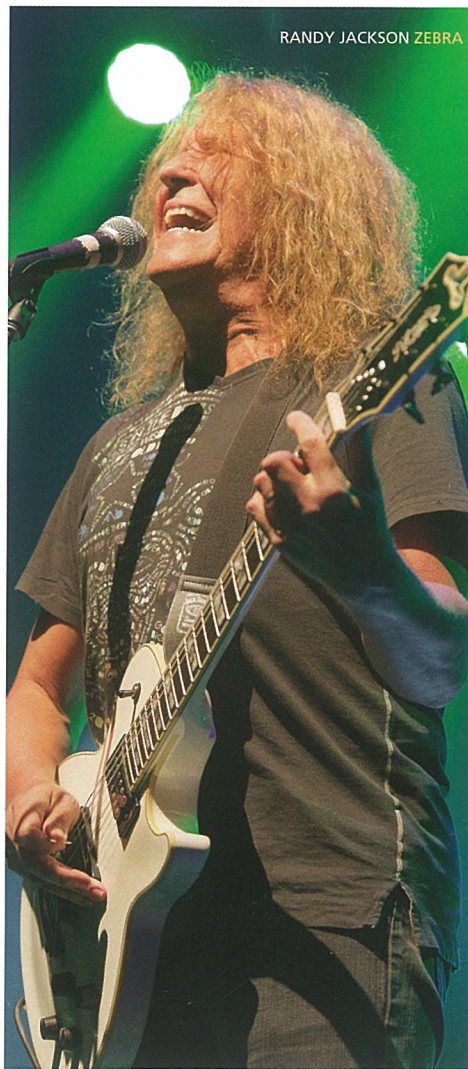
Squeezing The Strawbs into Sunday’s schedule just long enough to perform all of seminal 1974 album *Hero and Heroine* proved a minor miracle. The band received work visa clearance a day late and had to reschedule its flight from the U.K. to Philadelphia, missing Friday night’s show. Already booked for concerts in Sellersville, Pa. (two Saturday) and New York (Sunday night), The Strawbs approved Sunday’s matinee sortie after Bent Knee and Zebra agreed to trim their sets.

“We actually talked about canceling [The Strawbs] because we thought it would be impossible to contact everyone on such short notice to make the time available,” George explained. “But rather than give in to failure we decided to try and fix it. Hats off to our great team making this work out. We made that changeover without any time delay, which speaks volumes of what ROSFest is.”

More easily addressed was Riverside’s withdrawal two months prior upon Grudzinski’s sudden passing from heart failure. Finding a prominent replacement was vital says Roldan, who admitted Spock’s Beard — playing its second-straight ROSFest (third overall) — was

not his first choice. “Ultimately, I think bringing them in was a good move for us,” he said.

Poland’s Riverside seemed fated to miss its return engagement (2013) apart from losing Grudzinski, as the father of singer/bassist Mariusz Duda died only days before the festival. A touching video memorializing Grudzinski preceded Spock’s Beard’s set Saturday night and a guitar signed by festival musicians was raffled



RANDY JACKSON ZEBRA

off benefitting the late player’s family.

Favoring acts on the accessibly melodic end of the progressive music spectrum, ROSFest occasionally pitches a changeup that raises eyebrows but opens ears. This year’s welcome exception to the stylistic status quo was young American avant-garde group Bent Knee, whose sharply contrasting dynamics and kinetic stagecraft were beguiling.

Singer Courtney Swain’s eerie opening lines (“I imagine your dead body in my bed ...”) lilted toward echo-y shrieks from the waking side of a nightmare, pulling the crowd onto foreign turf. Bent Knee’s dissonant sonic chords,

calliope rhythms and dreamlike soundscapery ruffled some festgoers. But those willing to venture past linear-melodic habituation enthusiastically embraced the band’s challenging freshness and polish with several standing ovations.

Another festival wildcard perhaps more bewildering than enlightening was Sunday headliner Zebra. “Progressive” credentials qualifying this 1980s-vintage hard-rock/metal trio for ROSFest’s lineup seemed marginal at best, yet Roldan defended the choice. “I wanted to bring in something outside the box to draw more people. Zebra fell into that category of prior ROSFest bands like Wishbone Ash, Crack the Sky and Ambrosia,” he said. “Here’s a band rich in history that has been playing together for 40 years, still rockin’ their ass off.

“I think we made some good choices in the bands this year. We definitely were all over the place with them; nobody can say we don’t have diversity now!”

Further performance observations, in alphabetical order:

Bent Knee — In a festival known for upbeat songcraft, the group’s oft-jarring Twilight Zone-meets-Rosemary’s Baby noirish affectations translated better than perhaps anticipated. “That’s a totally different sound for people who never have heard a group like that,” Roldan said. “But I think we’ve got to bring out a little more from different avenues if we hope to grow as a festival. It’s not a bad thing introducing something new to people who haven’t seen it before.”

Circuline — Jefferson Airplane gone proggy? The smooth chemistry between co-lead vocalists Natalie Brown and Billy Spillane amidst soaring symphonic atmospheres evoked as much, especially in Brown’s Grace Slick-like phrasing.

ROSFest was a keynote event for this relatively new group, which played tightly despite recent lineup changes: Bassist Harold Skeete, on emergency loan from Ad Astra, deftly negotiated difficult material and contributed a poignant solo rendition of “America the Beautiful.” New guitar virtuoso Beledo shined with dexterous chops complementing the leads and fills of keyboardist Andrew Colyer, as Circuline plied tracks from debut disc *Return* and new release *Counterpoint*. Violinist Joe Deninzon, with whom the band often tours, guested late in the set.

Comedy of Errors — It wouldn’t be ROSFest without at least one “traditional” neo-progressive act and this Scottish sextet with 1980s roots served that obligatory fix. Cue the widdly synths, soaring guitars and earnest vocal presence of front man Joe Cairney, whose



delivery bore hints of Marillion-era Fish. Fans of Pallas, Pendragon, IQ, etc. enjoyed songs of struggle and hope from a lyric-centric melodic brew keyed by tracks from latest album *Spirit*. That included a healthy sampling of the disc's 45-minute epic.

Dave Kerzner Band—Another contemporary progressive entry with Pink Floyd-ian/post-progressive predilections, this quartet (absent the McBroom sisters singers) highlighted fare from latest work *New World*. With its namesake fronting on vocals/keyboards, the ensemble shifted between moody balladry and heavy wall-of-sound passages—the latter punctuated by Fernando Perdomo's over-the-top guitar solo near show's end. In the wildest display ever witnessed at ROSFest, Perdomo flailed away crazily before falling over, kicking his legs in the air and throwing his axe across the stage. The audience ate it up.

Kinetic Element—In town for a late-night gig at the "official" ROSFest hotel, Kinetic Element graduated to Friday night's theater lineup when The Strawbs rescheduled. Paced by keyboardist Mike Visaggio's colorful orchestrations and' pleasing vocal style, the band set a strong opening tone via tunes from latest album *Travelog*.

Visaggio got topical with a "Tarkus"-like solo segment honoring the late Keith Emerson and introduced epic "Travelog"—a wistful take on American identity—lamenting the current presidential race ("It's all bumming me out!"). Kinetic Element closed its set with a spirited, faithfully executed cover of Yes's "Order of the Universe."

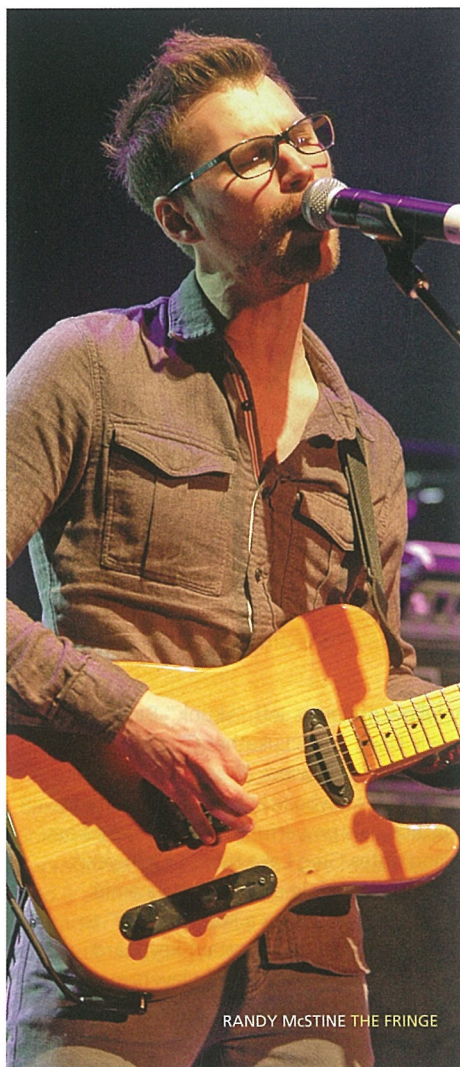
Magic Pie—The shift from Friday night opener to headliner (spelling The Strawbs) by this melodic-symphonic festival favorite no doubt pleased its diehard U.S. following. This was its fourth ROSFest appearance and, says Roldan, "The best I've seen that band play, ever." Energetically propelled by guitarist Kim Stenberg and keyboardist Erling Henanger alongside expressive lead vocalist Eirik Hanssen, the sextet worked through material emphasizing cuts from most recent album *King for a Day*.

"We essentially were going to have two headliners Friday night with Magic Pie and The Strawbs; The Strawbs would've had to follow Magic Pie, which is tough," Roldan noted. "We're going on 14 years [as a festival] so a band that has been with us four times, that is not bad. That's a good tenure."

No More Pain—Bent Knee, No More Pain: both a mythical arthritis cure and what Roldan hailed as ROSFest's "breakout" acts, coincidentally featuring the weekend's youngest musicians.

The long-haired/head-banging No More Pain blended raucous post-rock vibes with dis-

cordant spacey interludes and nimbly metallic Dream Theater-like instrumental riffery, drawing from last year's *The Post Human Condition* and *The Spader* EP. Observed Roldan, "This was an independent band nobody knew anything about, and after the festival they were given offers by different promoters from around the area to play shows. This is a band that will be going places."



Spock's Beard—Ranking with Magic Pie as a veritable ROSFest "house band," the Beard was freshly unpredictable in a very intense show that included rarely performed selections ("June," etc.) among tracks from 2015 opus *The Oblivion Particle*. The obvious highlight was a special guest appearance by former lead singer/drummer Nick D'Virgilio, on hand with new group The Fringe. Nick led a scorching version of "Surfing Down the Avalanche" from 2005's *Octane* and stuck around to lend support on backing vocals.

The Fringe—"Hello, we are a progressive rock band playing gigs at 11 in the morning!"

cracked erstwhile Flower Kings/Karmakanic bassist-singer Jonas Reingold. Sunday's "prog church" show marked the live debut of this all-star project (with drummer-vocalist Nick D'Virgilio, ex-Spock's Beard/Big Big Train plus guitarist-vocalist Randy McStine, Lo-Fi Resistance), comprising all of the trio's eponymously titled album. Bouncily melodic hard rock, jagged meter shifts and punkish energy marked the sound conjured by these strong musical personalities. D'Virgilio flexed his chops behind the drum kit while Reingold shined in a tasteful change-of-pace bass intermezzo.

"That was the best band we've ever had on Sunday morning, in my opinion," said Roldan. "They could've been a headliner."

The Strawbs—Brimming with elegant folksy soulfulness, the wonderfully presented *Hero and Heroine* brought a much-appreciated classic prog touch to ROSFest '16. Dave Cousins' warmly textured vocals and the lush symphonic work of keyboardist Dave Bainbridge (Iona) led this veteran outfit through wistful ballads and jaunty toe-tappers that left the crowd wanting more; 60 minutes just wasn't enough. Yet, the band getting shoehorned back into the lineup after facing cancellation proved mandatory.

Zebra—The power trio of Randy Jackson (guitars/vocals), Felix Hanemann (bass/keyboards/vocals) and Guy Gelso (drums/vocals) began its career in 1975 playing covers of Rush, Led Zeppelin and The Moody Blues. Jackson has led orchestral performances of Zeppelin, Moodies and Pink Floyd material and some Zebra pieces, such as Rush-like "The La La Song," toe the prog periphery. But this foremost was linear hard-rock with some acoustic ballads and symphonic shading added—well-played and well-attended by audience members who enjoyed closing the festival on a rock 'n' roll high note.

Festival ticket sales improved slightly from 2015, boosted by new front-row "platinum" seating permitting patrons to mingle with the headliners backstage. "This is one of the best new ways for us to raise money," said Roldan, adding that platinum seating will expand from 12 to 20 in 2017.

ROSFest is doing well enough that plans broached last year to pursue not-for-profit status have been shelved. "That was when we foresaw having trouble making ends meet; we thought it would be the best way to continue," George said. "However, we made changes helping to turn things around."

Meanwhile, the festival crew continues to advance production standards—attaining what Roldan termed "premium sound and lights" in 2016: "We stepped things up this year. I think for this one, we really nailed it." —