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Cardi B, Lizzo, Jorja Smith and Rosalia Rule Jay-Z's Made in America Festival By A.D. Amorosi



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Maybe it's because of the female-heavy lineup, but the eighth annual [Made in America](#) festival — Jay-Z's star-studded Labor Day weekend party on Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin Parkway — was the most drama-free in years. Not only did [Cardi B](#), [Lizzo](#), [Jorja Smith](#), [Rosalia](#) and Tierra Whack deliver memorable sets, Philadelphia native Meek Mill had a block named after him, and even the weather was better than usual, with Philly's usual late-summer humidity replaced by balmy breezes.

And if the crowds were maybe a bit smaller than in past years, that was a bonus for the people who were there, who had more room to roam and got decent views of the headliners.



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Headliners: The King of Chaos vs. Hip-Hop's Queen

Still riding high (and using the props from) his Astroworld tour, Sunday night headliner Travis Scott spent nearly one hour on stage with his AutoTune cranked to 11, his bass bins rattling on overdrive, and his body language set on aggressive skulking. Utilizing his hazy computer-processed vocals to maximize the lush, spare melodicism of songs like “Stargazing” and “Love Galore,” the set was powerful but repetitive and predictable (nearly every song ended with an explosion or gunshot sound effect). When the Houston rapper’s “Sicko Mode” hit with its ensuing fireworks crescendo, it was more of a relief than an exaltation.

The same could not be said of Cardi B’s Saturday set. She too was fond of gunshot sounds as punctuation, but her swift set was so tight, her comic timing so impeccable, and her rapping so on point that the booms never felt superfluous or bombastic. Then again, the rainbow-swirl catsuit-clad rapper may have had something to prove to the MIA crowd: She’d last performed at the festival two years ago, when “Bodak Yellow” was still a rising singer and she was mostly known as that one-time stripper from “Love & Hip-Hop.” What a long way she’s come: Toward the end of a set loaded with hits ranging from the autobiographical “Get Up 10” to “Bartier Cardi,” she signed off “Backin’ It Up,” with the boast, “I’m the queen of talking’ sh— and backin’ it up.”



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The Other Queen

A week after her star-making set on the VMAs, there’s little question that Lizzo is one of the breakthrough artists of 2019, so it was a little surprising that she was relegated to the second stage — especially since her soul-shouting set drew far more people than main stage artist Gucci Mane.

Hitting the stage in faux-denim Daisy Dukes and a corseted bustier, Lizzo took immediate command with her powerful baritone riding high atop of the mix on stewing theatrical tracks such as “Cuz I Love You,” the Prince-like “Worship,” and the stammering stormy weather soul of “Exactly How I Feel.”

Like Cardi B, Lizzo was a consummate performer with great comic momentum. When she wasn’t huckle-bucking, twirling, twerking or emphatically tousling her hair, she was pulling faces and sticking out her tongue. Beyond that, however, she was a body-

empowerment spokeswoman (calling the “big girls” in the audience “beautiful, fine deserving superstars”). While a dynamic “Truth Hurts” seemed to be the crowd’s favorite, the grand R&B lullaby of “Jerome” found Lizzo using a faux-cry while finding the roughest edges of her clarion clear voice.

In Another Questionable Stage Placement ...

British crooner James Blake has graced multiple hip-hop tracks, including ones by Travis Scott and Vince Staples, but having him deliver a sunset set of his atmospheric trip-hop and ambient soul on the main stage before Scott’s action-packed live set — and opposite Lil Uzi Vert’s madness on the second stage — was a questionable decision, considering the crowd. While his gossamer vocals, haunting arrangements and artful melodies were a perfect soundtrack as day segued into night, it was all so chill that the energy level dropped down to almost zero.

Repping for Rock

There may not have been a Pearl Jam or Nine Inch Nails on this year’s bill, but there was some rock in the mix: The multi-racial 99 Neighbors from Burlington, VT impressed Saturday’s crowd with its rap-rocking, Mac Miller-esque “Welcome to Chili’s” and Sunday got a dose of big guitars and gospel-rock melody from British-Nigerian singer-songwriter Jacob Banks. Sunday also saw the fest’s rockiest act, Brooklyn’s Charly Bliss, led by effervescent singer-guitarist Eva Hendricks, whose quirky power pop and Cyndi Lauper-like demeanor were a rare commodity at MIA.



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Old Souls, New Sounds: Jorja Smith and Rosalia

While her music tends to be mid-tempo and laid back, British jazz-soul chanteuse Jorja Smith practically stole Saturday from Cardi B. She brought the cool and sophisticated grooves of her 2018 debut “Lost & Found” to an outdoor festival setting, somehow without without losing an ounce of its dignified nuance. Then again, being dressed for the occasion (in a frilly pink dress with big yellow flowers) didn’t hurt.



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Another impressive newcomer was Spanish alt-flamenco singer Rosalia, already known to fans courtesy her acclaimed 2018 album, “El Mal Querer,” and her own starmaking performance on last week’s VMAs. As one of the few Spanish-language artists ever to play MIA (Prince Royce performed back in 2012), Rosalia’s sleek staging, wild choreography and avant-pop folk sounds made for one of the most passionate performances of the festival.

A Puzzling Set From Freddie Gibbs and Madlib

The oddball duo of Freddie Gibbs and Madlib rarely tour, so their set was one of the most anticipated of the festival. So imagine the surprise of the crowd — and maybe even DJ/producer Madlib — when Gibbs said after a short appearance, “We’re done. I got shit to do,” and left, after some wow-inspiring percussive scratching and stellar takes on the slow, twilight-y “Crime Pays” with the rapper’s deep, flinty voice in full jazzy effect.

Hometown Heroes: Tierra Whack, Pink Sweat\$, Lil Uzi Vert

Local hero Meek Mill might have had a street named for him, but he’s currently on tour with Future and left several other Philly artists to carry the torch. PinkSweat\$ is an anomaly these days — an R&B singer whose recordings see him accompanied only by his own guitar, held the audience in the palm of his hand. North Philly’s future-forward rapper Tierra Whack — whose “Whack World” debut, which contains 15 one-minute-long songs, was one of the most remarkable albums of 2018 — was there was magnetic, smart and crisply original. Dressed in a green outfit nearly as new wave-y as her music, the jerky bolts of music from “Whack World” popped like fireworks. And the eccentric Lil Uzi Vert, one of the late additions to the MIA lineup, did his best on Sunday night to captivate a crowd that had been on its feet for seven hours. Clad in leather pants, he bounded between bouncing party numbers and torrid emo-raps with hard trap rhythms, keeping the crowd satisfied — including Beyonce and Jay-Z who were spotted backstage watching his set.

Less Impressive Were ...

Two of the summer's biggest rappers, Megan Thee Stallion and Blueface, underwhelmed due to either hitting the stage late, or a musically uneven set, respectively. Anderson.Paak was funky and even rousing at times, but too often his sound was lost in a jumble of overly-complex changes and melodies that meandered. And mainstager Gucci Maine – expected to be a major highlight of Sunday's show – just never achieved liftoff, as his bragging raps wound up devoid of nuance and genuine spirit.

But overall, it made for a diverse and challenging one-stop-shop of talent for a long holiday weekend.