

# Rock 'n' roll tour of America



Neil Finn performs at Coachella music festival in 2007 in Indio

In my private rock 'n' roll heaven, a sartorially splendid Leonard Cohen would take off his fedora to greet me as I waltz through the gates, while tattooed angels raise their beatific voices with his to the chorus of *Hallelujah*.

St Paul McCartney would call me "dear", then jam out *Hey Jude* and *Live and Let Die* back to back.

Karen O from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs would chip in to dedicate a song to me and a just-miserable-enough Morrissey would make me feel comparatively euphoric about the quality of my former life.

Then Johnny Cash would preside over my marriage to M Ward and our first dance would be to a Buddy Holly swing number, as performed by the Rolling Stones. Live.

With one glaring matrimonial exception, this all happened to me.

And death wasn't even necessary for my nirvana experience.

Instead, a few holy days in the desert were enough to grant me the rapturous revelation — Coachella is the world's greatest music festival.

An annual event since 1999, Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival is a three-day, palm tree-lined extravaganza in California.

Held at a particularly lush set of polo fields in small-town Indio, the sun beats down from a permanently azure sky, while almost 50,000 music lovers pour in daily to live their dreams.

Sound good? I haven't even got started.

Coachella is an easy 240km cruise

## A heavenly musical line-up shows dreams can come true, writes Mary Bolling

from LA or — for my friend Annalise and I — an exhausting 4½ hours after a 6am start in Las Vegas.

But our spirits rally as we arrive at the expansive green lawns of the Empire Polo Club.

Polo is apparently huge in this town and the site holds six stages and 17 huge interactive art projects including a spectacular Tesla Coil.

The desert heat bears down, but is made bearable by all manner of scientific structures spraying water at willing victims.

It is just as well — between water stops, an enthusiastic punter could spend the whole day sprinting in a brave, but eventually hopeless effort to see more than 40 live acts.

It's a challenging realisation for someone who basks in the single-staged bliss of Australia's Meredith Music Festival every year, but sprint I did.

On Friday alone, it was from Los Campesinos! to M Ward, to the Black Keys to Conor Oberst, then Crystal Castles to Cohen, to Morrissey and to McCartney.

By my calculations, seven hours took in about four generations of music, about 30 of my favourite songs and a path worn through the grass totalling about 10km.

And a huge multi-generational crowd was in the same boat, wearing their paths between dozens of indie, dance and rock acts before settling in front of the giant of the night.

Before the bass-playing Beatle went on, two babyboomer blokes stood in front of me, glaring at Morrissey.

Proudly clad in their worn Sgt. Pepper's T-shirts, the Macca-focused pair were shaking their heads as the Smiths' frontman mournfully worked through his spectacular back-catalogue.

"Who is this depressing guy? Why doesn't he just kill himself?" one said to the other.

Miserable, yes, but it would take more than a few depressive lyrics, with accompanying perfect pop tunes, to bring down the mood at Coachella.

But every generation was all-attentive as the cute one took the stage and played a 35-song set.

A bit like Cohen's show two hours earlier, predominantly 20-something, festival-loving strangers grin stupidly as the familiar first bars of everything from *Drive My Car* to *Let It Be* rings out and a three-hour desert sing-along ensues.

It would be reasonable to wonder, how does a festival improve from here? And I did, too, but the next two days, the crowds are back and Coachella is ready for us.

Though enthusiasm waxes and wanes, and costumes and hijinks dominate the crowd every day, some punters get progressively more sore

and sorry for themselves in the face of relentless rock'n'roll.

But that's the other secret of my rock 'n' roll heaven.

While the malcontents, wearing a few extra layers of dust, complain about the cramped on-site camping conditions, Annalise and I luxuriate in the fact our nearby off-site camp, at gorgeous Lake Calaveras, allows for a cooling and cleansing morning swim before we hit the festival each day. Popular with plenty of others Coachella-bound, the queue for showers is still a dog-eat-dog battle during festival time.

By Sunday evening, however, energy is flagging across the board.

Lucky for the sunset act the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, who reinvigorate the 50,000-strong crowd and dedicate their gorgeous hit *Maps* to the Sunday Coachella crowd.

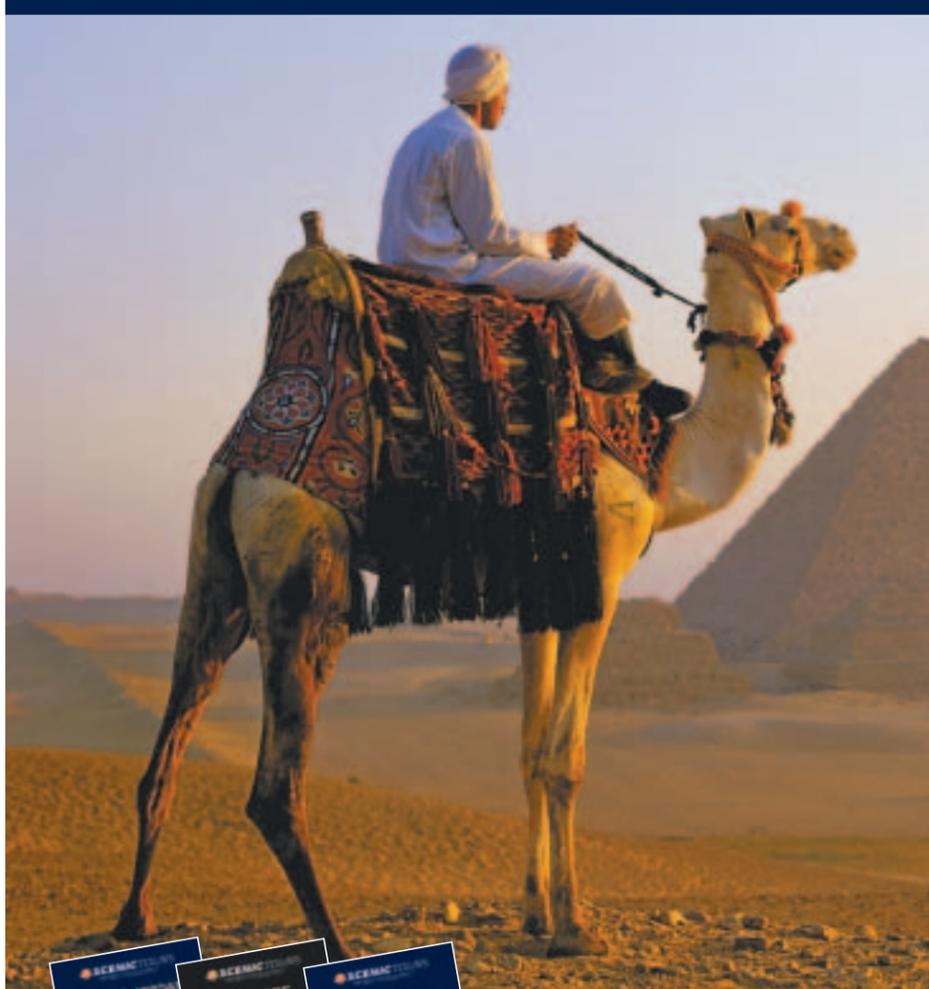
The rev-up is just in time — an hour later and hip-hop legend Public Enemy is playing its genre-defining album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* from start to end.

That's the sort of thing you need energy for, because you only see it once in your life.

So, it all sounds too incredible, right? How could all these magical events come together in one perfect weekend? And, believe me, I scarcely believe it either. But they did. And because they did, I'm still hoping for pending nuptials.

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