



Bands and Brands

An interview with Michael Eavis, founder of the Glastonbury Festival

By Jonny Anstead



Michael Eavis, like his father and grandfather before him, is a dairy farmer in the tiny village of Pilton, at the heart of rural Somerset. He is better known, however, as the eccentric and entrepreneurial creator of one of the world's largest music events, the Glastonbury Festival.

Michael Eavis is the owner of Worthy Farm, a 400-acre dairy farm in Pilton, Somerset. Set deep in the Vale of Avalon, a valley extending towards the legend-steeped Glastonbury Tor, the farm is, for much of the year, exactly as it has been since it was acquired by the Eavis family in 1894. For three days each year, however, it becomes the home of the Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts, the largest event of its kind in Europe.

Worthy Farm's rise to fame commenced in 1970. Inspired by a visit to the Bath Blues Festival, the 35-year old Michael Eavis realised that he had the perfect setting for a similar event. Seizing the opportunity, he booked a handful of pop and folk stars, including Mark Bolan, and staged what was then known as the Pilton Pop Festival. By today's standards, the first event was a cosy affair. 1,500 people paid the £1 entry fee, a price which included an ox-roast and milk from the farm's Friesian herd. In artistic terms, the event was a great success. Financially, however, Eavis made a loss.

Almost 35 years on, the Glastonbury Festival has grown almost beyond recognition. The event site has expanded onto neighbouring farms to accommodate the 150,000 members of the public, performers, police and security who descend on the Worthy Farm at the end of June. As Michael Eavis observes in a moment of characteristic understatement, 'It's quite a crowd, isn't it?'

Had it been the intention to develop an event of this scale from the outset? 'No, I thought that 2,000 people would be plenty,' Eavis exclaims, with the air of a man who is continually surprised and delighted by the festival's success. 'It suddenly started taking off...it went through the 80s like a dose of salts.' Indeed, the rise of the Glastonbury Festival in the 1980s was little short of meteoric. Beginning the decade with an attendance of 12,000, the event had expanded by 1990 to an attendance of 70,000.

For Michael Eavis, the key ingredients of the festival's phenomenal popularity are simple: 'We were doing things we enjoyed doing', he explains 'It seemed to fill a niche there somewhere. We obviously got the mix about right. It was a good mix, and it was quite unique,' he says, capturing in the most straightforward of terms some of the most fundamental and frequently neglected principles of destination-making.



Crucially, the festival had something to offer not only to the paying public, but also to the music industry. According to Eavis, the Glastonbury 'ethos' was vital in attracting the industry's support – 'people want to get involved...they want to play, they want to sing, they want to perform.' And the attractiveness of this ethos to the music industry, doubtless combined with the career boost a Glastonbury performance promised to an artist, ensured that Eavis's booking budget remained low, while the quality of his line-ups soared.

The festival's evolution has, however, not been without its problems. Michael Eavis recounts his story as an epic tale of success against the odds, of an individual risking everything, including his home, to achieve a personal vision in the face of adversity. Adversity, in the case of the Glastonbury Festival, took the form of Mendip District Council. The role of the local authority, for Eavis, was less about enabling and encouraging the growth of the festival, than attempting to prevent it (a far cry from the current climate, in which local authorities across the country would go to major lengths to host such an event). In colourful terms, Eavis describes past 'struggles' with the local authority, responsible for issuing or retaining the festival's Public Entertainment Licence. 'You have to tread your way through the legal stuff and you have to go to appeal all the time,' he explains, 'magistrates saved my bacon at the end of the day.'

If the success of the Glastonbury Festival is owed largely to the dogged perseverance of Michael Eavis, it is inevitable that many other projects have fallen by the wayside in the face of an unsupportive public sector. In Eavis's opinion, the lack of understanding between the public sector and the cultural entrepreneur that has characterised the history of the Glastonbury Festival may have caused untold damage to Britain's cultural life: 'I dread to think of the things that have been stopped.'

These days, however, Eavis is eager to present a more optimistic view of the festival's co-operation with the public sector: 'I think we've actually cracked it with the local council now,' he declares. Much of this success lies in the new-found ability of the Glastonbury Festival organisers to communicate loudly and clearly to the public sector the benefits of the festival:

'Millions and millions go into the local infrastructure', Eavis says. 'Blacksmiths, plumbers, welders, metal suppliers, paint, whatever it is, we try and buy within a 15 mile radius of the farm!' As with Tim Smit of Cornwall's Eden Project, Eavis has discovered that the key to securing public sector co-operation is to make visible the demonstrable and significant local economic impact of the event: Glastonbury Festivals Ltd spends more than £3 million locally each year in preparation for the festival,

£300,000 on employment of local people, and donates £600,000 to local charities. Visitors are estimated to spend £250,000 on local accommodation, while 130 trade stalls on the festival site come from within 25 miles. This does not take into account increased trade in local shops at festival time, not to mention the contribution of the festival to year-round tourism in the area.

The argument is robust and well rehearsed – it has had to be, to satisfy 30 years of Public Entertainment Licence applications and, frequently, subsequent appeal hearings. Eavis has learnt – albeit reluctantly – to talk in terms that the public sector understands. Perhaps, some may argue, it should have been the other way around.

The major growth of the Glastonbury Festival seen in the 1980s continued throughout the 1990s, with attendance figures reaching 100,000 by the turn of the century. Official attendance figures, however, tell only half the story. In the year 2000, gatecrashing – an activity which had become almost as much a part of the festival as the music itself – reached crisis levels, adding to the total attendance an estimated 100,000 illicit festival-goers. No wonder, then, that Michael Eavis describes the 2000 event as 'the last of the really big ones.'



Following the 2000 festival, which cost £1.25 million to police, prompted 98 noise complaints and which stirred fears of overcrowding of the sort that brought about the death of nine concert-goers at the Roskilde music festival of same year, it was clear that urgent action was necessary.

Mendip District Council prosecuted Eavis for breach of Public Entertainment Licence and ordered an extensive security overhaul. Any future licence for the event would only be granted if a range of measures were put in place, most significantly in the form of a 3.6 metre fence running around the entire perimeter of the festival site. In order to ensure that these demands were met, Michael Eavis drafted in the operation management services of Mean Fiddler plc, the UK's largest live music organiser and the company behind a raft of major events, including the Carling Weekend. By way of

return, Mean Fiddler acquired a 20% stake in the Glastonbury Festival, rising to 40% over three years.

The commercial aspect of the Glastonbury Festival is, in itself, nothing new – Eavis's intention for the first festival was to 'pay off my mortgage' (a goal which, by now, he must have achieved several times over). But while this has remained, in the past, a well-kept secret, the involvement of Mean Fiddler plc has dragged the festival's commercialism into the spotlight, leading to rumbling accusations that the festival has sold out by rejecting its bohemian image in favour of a new corporate existence. Inevitable as this may be, it presents at least three difficult issues for the festival.

The first is the changing demographic of the festival audience. In the past, gatecrashing was regarded by many as part of the Glastonbury tradition – a sort of 'Robin Hood' situation where those who were unable to pay the entry fee were allowed and expected to climb the fence to join in the fun. The arrival of the 'super-fence' in 2002 solved the problem of gatecrashing, but with it, the festival lost many of what Eavis calls the 'old festival class.' This may come as a relief to local residents, whose abiding fear has been of the 'travellers' attracted by the event. But it is of concern to Michael Eavis, who is well aware that the festival trades on its

'hippie' image, and relies on it to set it apart from the plethora of other major music events in the UK. 'It's not really about middle class people,' he says, 'I'm trying to hang on to the old audience.'

With this in mind, Eavis is taking measures to prevent the gentrification of the festival. He intends to overhaul the ticket sales process for 2005 to guarantee an equal chance of obtaining a ticket for everyone, regardless of whether or not they have access to the internet. 'It's all going back to basics...people will write in with a postcard...they're all going into a huge computer tombola and we'll pick out 115,000 of them.' Of course, this fine egalitarian talk neatly side-steps what is arguably the main prohibitive factor for the 'old festival class' – the £112 ticket price.

The second issue is the festival's increasing acceptance of

corporate sponsorship, with the progressive move from 'bands' to 'brands'. In 2004, two major multinationals were present – Orange as 'Official Communications Partner', and Budweiser as 'Official Beer'. Consequently, the event is awash with giant text message boards, a premium rate 'festival news, reviews and gossip' telephone line, and even a 'Budweiser recycling centre'.

This invasion of sponsorship into the event poses a very real threat to the Glastonbury brand, which derives much of its value from the independence and artistic integrity of the event – accusations of 'selling out' surrounding the highly commercialised relaunch of Woodstock in the 1990s played a significant role in its failure. Eavis realises that he is treading a very fine line, and his defence is well-prepared: 'We don't accept sponsorship from products we don't use. We need phones, and people drink beer.' Is it a fair defence? Or one that could be argued for

almost any product? The answer is unclear and probably matters only little. It is an argument which allows Eavis to have the best of both worlds, by accepting the cash offered by the multinationals, while retaining, for the less cynical at least, a flawless integrity. Will we ever see the 'Budweiser Glastonbury'? 'No, never, never, never, no! We wouldn't go that far!'

The third issue is the ideological sea-change represented by the modern festival's attitude towards profits. The festival's traditional not-for-profit ethos, reinforced by its commitment to good causes (Glastonbury Festivals Ltd donated over £1 million to charities locally and world-wide in 2003) is somewhat compromised by Mean Fiddler plc's part-ownership of the event, and corresponding share of the net profit. Eavis's defence takes the form of a strong emphasis on positive PR – in order to ensure that public attention is focused firmly on Glastonbury's more friendly aspects, senior figures from the major good causes (Oxfam, Greenpeace and WaterAid) queue up at regular intervals to sing the festival's praises.

The Glastonbury Festival has emerged in the new millennium as a series of dramatic and well-managed contradictions: claiming to offer something intimate and unique, it is Europe's largest festival; trading on a bohemian reputation, it appeals to the middle class; boasting a not-for-profit ethos, it possesses a distinctly corporate remit.

As long as these tensions are held in balance, it is a deal that works for everyone: Mean Fiddler Music Group plc makes a profit, Oxfam et al receive vital high-profile exposure and

financial support, while Mendip District Council receives a major economic boost from a trouble-free event. Most importantly, public demand currently outstrips supply.

But is it a sustainable model? Or will the delicate mixture of partners and respective agendas prove too difficult to manage? For example, will Mean Fiddler shareholders continue to endorse the local purchasing policy which is crucial to the festival's licence? The answer must be yes, but only if share prices continue to perform as solidly as they have over the past year. But should such commercial pressure

be allowed to influence? Arguably the plc profit motive, that sees distribution to shareholders nationwide (some of whom must be the 'ugly' corporate institutional investors), is a far cry from the early co-op style thinking of Eavis in the 1970s. The way in which the organisers of the Glastonbury Festival tackle this dilemma will be vital to the future of the event.



If they fail to accept, acknowledge and communicate the commercial agenda (in the manner of the most effective social enterprises), and continue to deny that such an agenda exists, then the public will undoubtedly become disillusioned by its perceived double standards.

In the wake of Glastonbury's transformation, a host of new festivals are springing up in the UK. Frequently, their appeal is that they

are 'like Glastonbury used to be'. For local authorities, the trick will be to learn from Glastonbury's history – to find out early on how to accommodate, support and sustain the uniqueness of these events and the cultural entrepreneurs behind them. And for the organisers of these events? They could do far worse than to take Michael Eavis's advice:

'You have to find a way of doing something that works at the lowest level...a little group of people or even one person has to believe in it – he has to bring more people on board. Then it works, as you have a nucleus, a successful pattern...This is organic, this is from the bottom up... people have to love it from the start – it will grow a bit each year.'

Jonny Anstead is a Consultant at Locum Destination Consulting.