

Portishead's Beth:  
"This one's a happy  
one!" Or maybe not

## All Tomorrow's Parties: Nightmare Before Christmas

Butlins, Minehead Friday, Dec 7 – Sunday, Dec 9

Drone metal, mash-up IDM and The Horrors: it must be ATP

**T**he nights have drawn in, the winter's in full flow, but on Somerset's grim, rain-lashed brink, something black, bleak and beautiful begins. In the 10 long years since Portishead's last album, it's become common for benighted idiots to refer to them as 'dinner party' music. Now, finally, one of best bands of the '90s return to remind us that the only dinner party they could ever grace is one in which a main course of black existential despair was followed by a helping of the howling vacuum of the human heart. Happy new year, everyone!

Rather than just sneaking back on to the scene, the Bristolian trip-hop pioneers have grandly plumped for curating the country's coolest (literally; it is December) festival. Even by ATP standards, they've selected an obscure line-up, heavy on stoner metal and noise-rock, short on laughs. When no-wave guitar guru Glenn Branca is one of the best-known names and The Horrors are the token pop act, you're not in Reading any more, Toto. You are, bizarrely, in Butlins.

Friday afternoon finds

**Sparklehorse's** Mark Linkous struggling through a spare, low-key set; just him, a guitar and a bleeding heart. Beautiful as it is, he can't quite hold the crowd's attention alone. No such problems for the aforementioned **Glenn Branca**, who is experimenting with how many guitars it takes to short-circuit a brain, the stage crammed left-to-right with players including Sonic Youth's **Thurston Moore** for the debut of a new work that proves fascinating, multi-layered and mind-mangling. **The Horrors** inject some

youthful energy with a fast-and-furious set that draws a large crowd. Faris either succumbs to stage-fright or attempts some deep comment about the relationship between life and art by holding a hand-mirror, reflective side out, in front of his face. Or maybe he just wanted to check his eyeliner and got confused.

The tension is knee-chewingly intense when the lights finally dim and **Portishead's** Beth Gibbons creeps onstage. Bravely opening with two new songs, 'Wicca' and 'Hunter', it's clear that they've lost none of the nervous energy, the contrast between the smoothness

'Mystic', 'Peaches' and 'Machine Gun') are denser, more percussive, a promise of thrills to come in April, when their third album finally arrives.

Dawn blows in cold and dank on Saturday, the perfect environment for **Malcolm Middleton's** blackly hilarious indie confessions. "You may have noticed this isn't happy hour," he deadpans, tearing through tracks from his recent misnomered album 'A Brighter Beat'.

**Aphex Twin** closes the evening by hilariously confounding bearded fans of intelligent dance music, the genre he practically invented, with a lowbrow but high-fun set of old skool and jungle that fills the floor of the holiday camp disco until well past stupid o'clock.

Sunday is drone metal day, with performances by **Sunn O))), Boris**

and **OM**, but for those who detect a hint of emperor's new clothes in watching a man in a hood hitting a bass and growling for an hour, there's a roaming, experimental show with tribal drums and swirling guitars from former Can vocalist **Damo Suzuki**. **Black Mountain's** Led Zep-indebted stoner rock walks a gorgeous tightrope between formless wanderings and satisfyingly chunky riffs before sadly blowing it with an over-indulgent outro that sends a confused crowd wandering towards Pizza Hut's all-you-can-eat buffet.

Portishead's fellow Bristolians **Fuck Buttons** bring the weekend to a fittingly atmospheric close, their spooky post-rock-ambient-noise-electronica the inheritor of the Portishead spirit. After this, Christmas just seemed shit. **Emily Mackay**

Even by ATP standards this  
is an obscure line-up: lots  
of noise, not many laughs



Well, Christmas is a time  
for reflection, Faris



Thurston Moore:  
true genius

of Gibbons' magisterial voice and the gritty aggression of Geoff Barrow's samples and rhythms that made them so thrilling. An acid rendition of 'Cowboys' and a stripped-down, heartbroken 'Wandering Star' are just two among a set that's wall-to-wall highlights. The new tracks (three others are unveiled: