

Meliksetian MB Briggs

ARTFORUM

[SCENE & HERD](#)

Supreme Being

LOS ANGELES

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Left: [Jack Black](#) with artist [Steven Hull](#). Right: [Steven Hull's](#) *Circus of Death* installation. (Photos: [Miriam Katz](#))

“**FUCK THIS VIP SHIT**—I want some *real* California dick!” cried a braless [Bridget Everett](#) as she made her way toward the general admission section of the crowd. Everett eventually found an object for her affection, a masked dandy she nicknamed “Corky” (cause he was “Down’s-y in the eyes”), whom she cajoled into playing a grown-up game of airplane, bearing the weight of her significant frame right there in the middle of the stage. Soon enough she was motorboating [Peaches](#) (the musician, not the fruit), forcing a security guard’s head up her dress, and crooning gorgeously about lady parts of various shapes and sizes. The sun was still shining, but she was working on her night moves.

FOMO abounded among the ten thousand attendees at the second annual Festival Supreme, a ten-hour comedy, music, and visual art event organized by [Jack Black](#) and [Kyle Gass](#) of Tenacious D. Many sported elaborate costumes as we navigated the fifty-plus live acts across four stages, as well as a fifty

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four-thousand-square-foot art installation, all in an early-twentieth-century Shriners temple located in downtown Los Angeles. The lineup was sick (Fred Armisen, Margaret Cho, Nick Kroll, to name a few), and as if that weren't enough, special, surprise guests included Weird Al Yankovic, who shredded the Keytar with Tenacious D, and Zach Galifianakis, who starred, along with *Orange Is the New Black's* Lauren Lapkus and *Parks and Recreation's* Adam Scott, in a live rendition of Scott Aukerman's podcast and IFC show *Comedy Bang! Bang!*

The heart of the festival lay in its focus on comedy music, a seemingly puerile medium with surprisingly lofty potential. “The whole singer-songwriter reveal-your-feelings thing gets to be kind of embarrassing,” explained Gass. “But comedy in music is like a Brechtian alienation device—we’re removed from our feelings to reveal real truths.” For Peaches, incorporating humor into her music allows her to promote a political agenda “without scaring people off.” Plus, she added, “It’s really depressing when bands take themselves too seriously.”

A significant portion of Black’s efforts went toward producing and promoting the festival’s visual art component, the enormous, multiartist *Circus of Death* spearheaded by sculptor and painter Steven Hull. Black has supported Hull’s efforts in the past, such as the artist-run Las Cienegas Projects, and in this case, shelled out \$150,000 for the installation, which featured a haunted church/bouncy house by Jim Shaw (who also performed in the space) as well as twenty monster costumes by Marnie Weber (inhabited by Otis College of Art and Design students). “Creating an art element to the show was a survival instinct,” Black told me. “We want this festival to live on, and this is what really sets it apart.” When I referenced Black as a legitimate arts patron, comedian Tim Heidecker quipped: “Yes, yes, of course—as any millionaire should be.”

By design, a good deal of the acts, such as Eric Andre and Maria Bamford, were unusual or experimental in some way. “We definitely like edgier, performance art stuff,” Gass told me. In his set, comedian T. J. Miller conformed to the nonconformist context: “With all of these incredible, unique performers that I admire on the lineup, I just couldn’t come out here and do older stuff that I knew would kill. I had to take a risk.” This included absurdist material about giraffes, and the reading and subsequent burning of a philosophical tract by Eugène Ionesco. The cheering crowd was on board with it all.

Although encircled by many high-minded performances and artworks, FS was still a raucous festival (perhaps due to its proximity to USC), with requisite vomit, brawls, and bathroom lines. (I was even knocked in the jaw by an exuberant fellow spectator.) Comedy musician Bo Burnham’s show seemed like a rejoinder to the privileged party vibe, and kicked off with a sobering, prerecorded announcement: “The world is not funny. Twenty percent of the world does not have access to clean drinking water.” The track eventually let up a bit: “The world is not funny. Guy Fieri has two functioning restaurants.” Burnham then belted a stunning, satirical song about his (and many of the audience members’) “plight” as a straight white

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male: "I've never been the victim of a random search for drugs, but don't say my life is easy till you've walked a mile in my Uggs."

As the sun set, the vibe became even more frenetic, and the choices between acts became even more difficult. Enjoy the Workaholics' rap as "Hip-hop wizards"? Join Everett and Cho in a three-way grind during Peaches' "Fuck the Pain Away" finale? The one true moment of stillness came toward the end of the night, when for the first time during the entire fest there was only one performance to attend: the 25th anniversary reunion of *The State*, the beloved MTV sketch comedy show, featuring all eleven members performing resounding renditions of iconic numbers such as (my personal childhood favorite) "The Jew, the Italian, and the Red Head Gay." Thousands looked on in rapt attention, including the pop star Pink, who, perhaps slightly self-conscious of her red carpet-ready attire amid the casual crowd, asided as I snapped a photo: "Just tell 'em I'm in costume like everyone else."

For *State* fans it was nostalgia city; for everyone else, it was a chance to see some of the most vital forces in comedy today. Overall, Festival Supreme felt like a living history of comedic production over the past forty years, from Dr. Demento to Weird Al to Tenacious D; from Cheech & Chong to the Workaholics. "We wouldn't have a career if it weren't for them," said the Workaholics's Blake Anderson about the stoned elder statesmen. And whether she likes it or not, Peaches has to be a touchstone for Awkwafina, the YouTube celebrity/potty-mouthed singer. "Music just elevates things," remarked Gass at the end of the evening, more than a bit wistfully. A little Brecht goes a long way.

— Miriam Katz