



Fans got into the swing of things on the third and final day of the 15th Meredith Music Festival yesterday and, for them, the weather was kind.

PICTURE: WINK BLOOM

Fifteen years on, Meredith magnet still draws a crowd

By DEWI COOKE

THERE'S a man walking around in flesh-coloured bike shorts and another in tight red hotpants. Yet another has eschewed clothing altogether and is standing nude among an expectant crowd.

It's the annual Meredith Music Festival and, although it kicks off the summer festival season, Meredith is a festival like no other. For a start, it's undoubtedly Australian.

The music line-up emphasises local acts and the crowd sports Australia's unofficial national emblems: foxy shorts and stubble holders. There's a Coolangatta Gold feel to the place.

Alongside these 1980s throwbacks are beautiful young women in flowing frocks and sunburned rock fans in muscle cars. They all come to Meredith for different reasons — the music isn't the only drawcard — and most of them leave vowing to return. Because Meredith is not just a festival, it's an experience.

Organisers say there have never been any major incidents in the festival's 15-year history, and even the St John Ambulance Service said its worse casualties this year were the cut feet of thong-wearing partygoers. Anything else, one organiser says, and "that's just not Meredith".

The first festival, in 1991,

attracted about 200 friends and Meredith locals. This year, the 10,000 tickets to the event were sold out in 10 days.

It's held on part of Jack and Mary Nolan's 445-hectare property about 10 kilometres from Meredith.

The Nolans have been involved in the festival since day one, their son Chris is an original organiser. "He did warn me," Mr Nolan said, "that one day the farm would come second."

The Nolans' story is tied to the festival's history. Nine years ago Chris, now 37, suffered brain injury after travelling in Vietnam. He can no longer talk or see and he can barely move, but he

returns for the festival, in his wheelchair, each year.

When Chris went into a coma in 1996, Meredith co-organisers Matt High and Greg Peel seriously considered shutting it down. But they went ahead, "because it's what Chris would have wanted", Mrs Nolan said.

Strangers often approach Chris and pat him on the back to thank him for what he's done for music fans and fun-lovers. This year there'd been more than usual, Mrs Nolan said.

She recalls the Dirty Three's first Meredith gig in 1994 as among the most memorable. A favourite band with Chris, back then it drew the biggest crowd it

had ever played to. The band has returned to play the festival many times, including last year's famous dusk performance as thunder and lightning rent the sky.

"I think it's our privilege, really, to be able to offer an environment," Mrs Nolan said.

"I think it's for people who are really seeking... the best in people. You hear all the fear and terror... but I think somehow there's something pretty special in people coming together and being able to get on.

"And that's the way people can be."

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