

# GAGA, BONO, ELTON, ROBBIE...FAKE FESTIVAL WITH BIGGER NAMES THAN GLASTO

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By **DAVID LOWE**

**PICKING** my way through a sea of colourful tents, the scent of smoking barbecues hangs in the air as I look for Lady GaGa and her entourage.

The middle of a field near Beverley, Yorkshire, is an unlikely spot to meet the pop sensation – but then this is no ordinary music festival.

With appearances by Take That, U2, Madonna, Black Eyed Peas, Eric Clapton and many more, its line-up is unrivalled, even by the likes of Glastonbury. But there's a catch.

When I finally stumble upon Lady GaGa, on a worn brown rug in trackie bottoms and struggling to do her make-up in the fading sunlight, clearly she's not **THE** Lady GaGa. Emma Watkins is one of the dozens of impersonators who appeared at Tribfest, the world's largest tribute band festival.

Now in its fifth year, the three-day event draws more than 5,000 fans, attracted not only by the fun bands, but the relatively cheap £30 tickets and family-friendly atmosphere.

Giggling, Emma, 26, admits she's about to face the crowds in less than an hour – and hasn't even had chance to put up her tent.

The full-time singer from Bristol says: "I've always worked in the performing arts and started doing Lady GaGa two years ago."

"The demand is incredible. I've toured all over the UK and am off to China later this year. There is a huge market for tributes there."

## Shed

"Although it can be lucrative, my life bears no resemblance to Lady GaGa's. For a start, I got a lift here in the back of my friend's Renault."

"I live in a two-bedroom terrace house with my partner Mike and our border terrier, Darcy. It's a normal, suburban existence."

As a trained singer, Emma reveals it's easier to replicate Lady GaGa's unique vocals than her infamous array of outrageous costumes.

Emma says: "If only I had her team of fashion designers, the Haus of GaGa. Mine is more like the Shed of GaGa."

"I sew some of them myself and get help from a professional costumier and my manager."

Later, in a yellow wig, ripped net tights, six-inch heels and a silver foil gown, Emma takes to the stage to a roar from the crowd and belts out a rendition of Bad Romance the real GaGa would have been proud of.

Backstage is now abuzz as the 21-man crew of the Russian Eric Clapton tribute, D'Black, pack equipment after their performance.

The pushy tour manager, Lidiya Nikishchenkova, is deliberating over whether lead singer Vladimir Avetissian, 54, is available for an interview.

Her eyes light up when I tell her The Sun is Britain's biggest paper.

Five minutes later I am ushered swiftly aboard a cavernous red tour coach to meet the Russian Eric Clapton and his beautiful wife, Anna, 34.

When a cameraman appears to record the conversation it feels unnervingly like Vladimir is Eric.

In fact, he is a multi-millionaire oligarch who funds this slick operation out of his own pocket.

In broken English, Vladimir says: "I was a big guy in Russia – deputy of the general director of the biggest electricity company in the world. I also have businesses of my own."

"When I was 17 I played in a group but didn't turn professional and went into business."

"Now I am finished and I can do my dream of playing Eric Clapton. I



**Lady GaaGaa**

**EMMA WATKINS**, 26, from Bristol.  
By day: Actress and singer.  
By night: Lady GaaGaa (Lady GaGa)

don't make any money but that's not why I do it."

Vladimir's life as a self-funded pop star has taken him to gigs in France, Spain, Germany and the USA.

Roughing it on the road is very different to the luxurious lifestyle Vladimir enjoys at his plush homes in the Russian capital, Moscow, and the prosperous city of Samara.

He says: "Of course Anna and I have servants. And we have a governess for our children – a girl of nine and a boy of two."

"At home I keep a lot of Eric Clapton memorabilia, like his autographed guitar. I spent a lot of money on things at an auction in New York. It's my passion." In true

rock 'n' roll fashion I'm given the cue that my interview time is up and leave the coach.

Dodging past queues at the Pizza 4 Events, Mexicana Cantina and Burger Queen stalls (even the food concessions sound like a tribute), I meet another group.

## Idols

Lead singer, Charlotte Marsden, of the Black Eyed PeaZ, is waiting for me on a deckchair.

The 34-year-old works as an administrator for a careers advice firm but gigs on the side for extra cash.

Charlotte says: "We've been going for two years and have been incredi-



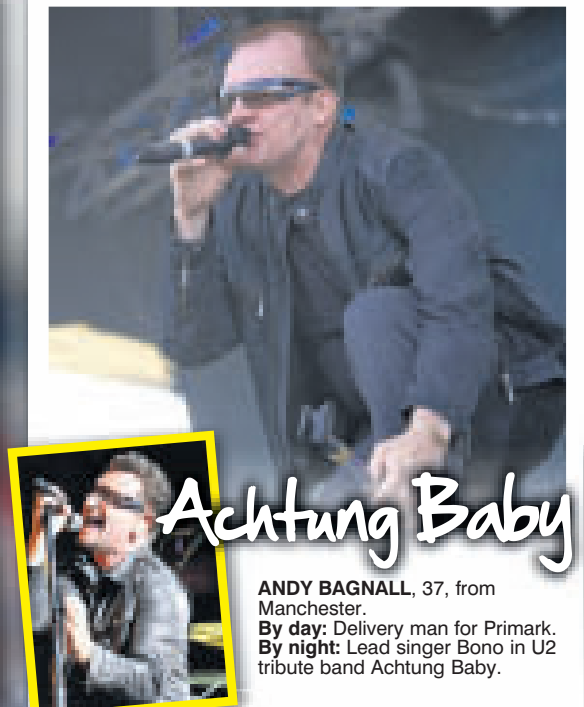
**Ultimate Elton**

**PAUL BACON**, 50, from High Wycombe, Bucks.  
By day: Out-of-work corporate events organiser.  
By night: Ultimate Elton, an Elton John tribute.



**Back For Good**

**TONY LEWIS**, 31, **STEVEN CRAVEN**, 28, **DANNY MAINES**, 28, **MATTHEW HALL**, 20, **JOE CURREY**, 20, all from Manchester area.  
By day: Typical group of lads.  
By night: Robbie, Howard, Gary, Mark and Jason in Back For Good, a manufactured Take That tribute who have become used to thongs being thrown on stage.



**Achtung Baby**

**ANDY BAGNALL**, 37, from Manchester.  
By day: Delivery man for Primark.  
By night: Lead singer Bono in U2 tribute band Achtung Baby.

**Q: What have a Primark van driver and a Russian oligarch got in common?**

**A: They're both pop legends at weekends**



**Blondie UK**

**DENISE DANIELLE**, 40, from Hull.  
By day: Singer and mum of one.  
By night: Debbie Harry in Blondie tribute act Blondie UK.



**D'Black**

**VLADIMIR AVETISSIAN**, 54, from Moscow, Russia.  
By day: Multi-millionaire Russian oligarch.  
By night: Lead singer in D'Black, an Eric Clapton tribute.

keep the bookings coming in. As long as the audience is having a good time, I don't see anything wrong with it."

The thousands of punters thronging the sprawling grounds of the Beverley Polo Club clearly agree.

Among them is Rebecca Morris, a local authority manager from Lincolnshire, who is at Tribfest with her kids Ted, nine, and Lillian, seven.

Rebecca, 40, says: "This is our second year. It's a great event for families. The tickets aren't expensive and there's a relaxed atmosphere."

Nearby Jeni Clark, 22, a nursery nurse, and her pal Terri Ransom, 22, a bathroom sales adviser, both from Hull, are sipping beers in the sun.

Terri says: "I've been to the Leeds festival and this beats it hands down. I don't care if the acts are only tributes, the atmosphere is amazing."

"And you can get a fry-up for £2, the same as a beer. At Leeds I paid £5 for a bacon sandwich."

## Hobby

Cheers go up as U2 impersonators, Achtung Baby, kick off their set in livley style. There's no denying Bono, or rather Andy Bagnall, 37, sounds incredibly like his idol.

Afterwards the Primark delivery man keeps on his Bvlgari shades while explaining he got his big break on ITV lookalike show Stars In Their

Eyes. Andy, from Manchester, says: "I sent in a cassette of me singing With Or Without You and made the 1995 final."

"I've been performing as Bono ever since so it was the beginning of a nicely paid hobby."

Behind us the crowd go wild yet again as Blondie UK, headed by chisel-cheeked blonde bombshell Denise Danielle, take the stage.

To borrow a phrase from Achtung Baby's brave first song, none of the acts at Tribfest are even better than the real thing.

But no one here will let that stand in the way of a good time.  
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**5,000** revellers at 2011 Tribfest weekend

**45** tribute acts performed over three days

**£80** cost of a weekend adult ticket

**5** years Tribfest has been running