

New Orleans City Business (LA)

April 18, 2005

Jazz Fest Series: MTV-generation music corrupting festival?

When the Dave Matthews Band, Nelly and Elvis Costello take the stage at Jazz Fest within the next 10 days, they will be met by thousands of adoring fans.

But beneath the roar of applause will be the discontented chorus of Jazz Fest disciples who believe the MTV culture is corrupting their beloved event.

"The one thing tourists always impress upon me is that they want to hear New Orleans music," said New Orleans trumpeter Jamil Sharif. "It seems like in recent years the festival has been bringing in more national and international acts, which is good. But when you say the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, you think you're going to see all New Orleans musicians, like it was when it first started."

In 1970, the inaugural Jazz Fest took place on one weekend at the Municipal Auditorium and Congo Square. George Wein, Jazz Fest creator and CEO of Festival Productions Inc., the New York production company behind the event, said he first conceived of Jazz Fest using only performers who lived in New Orleans, were born in New Orleans or were doing something important for New Orleans.

Wein said he fiercely resisted suggestions to bring in more famous national acts. But slowly but surely, he booked people such as Dizzy Gillespie and other well-known jazz artists to play with New Orleans musicians.

It was a difficult decision, Wein said, but he realized he needed big names to attract big crowds, which led to an influx of contemporary artists. The cost of producing the festival now exceeds \$10 million.

"The economic pressures are severe with Jazz Fest," Wein said. "There is nobody giving money to this festival. It's the public that pays to keep this alive and for that to happen you have to give them a reason to come."

The original Jazz Fest featured New Orleans artists such as Pete Fountain, Fats Domino and the Meters. By the late '70s the festival was booking such heavies as Stevie Wonder, B.B. King and Bonnie Raitt. And in 2001, more than 160,000 people choked the infield to catch the Dave Matthews Band and rapper Mystikal.

"We're talking about staying with the times," Wein said. "When we started in 1970, pop culture, things like the Beatles, was brand new. Now it's a big thing in America and part of our musical heritage. Which is why I don't understand the complaints about pop culture being at the festival because if you didn't have it you wouldn't have anybody out on the field and then you wouldn't have a festival in New Orleans."

Fountain has played in every Jazz Fest. He said the bill was dominated by local acts in the early years but the roster of artists began to incorporate out-of-town musicians and non-jazz performers as the event grew.

"At that time there were a lot of local jazz bands and they don't have that as much anymore," Fountain said.

"But when you bring in national acts, things like hip-hop, that's really strange and it changed a lot. I suppose they want to bring the kids in. The old people can't have everything. I guess we had it our way for so long."

New Orleans rock band Cowboy Mouth has played Jazz Fest for 15 straight years. Drummer and singer Fred LeBlanc said there has always been a faction of local bands and fans upset by the inclusion of national acts. But the reality is the lure of the national acts provides the financial stage for local acts to play.

"It's great that Jazz Fest is so warmly supported by people of the community but it's also supported by people outside of the community," he said. "And you have to market to those people as well. If it weren't for the Dave Matthews and Widespread Panics and Steve Winwoods you might not be able to have a Cowboy Mouth or Galactic or Johnny Sketch and the Dirty Notes."

Quint Davis, president of Festival Productions Inc.-New Orleans, says the mixture of national and local acts has produced some of his most memorable Jazz Fest experiences.

"I remember when Stevie Wonder sat in on drums with The Meters," Davis said. "He shocked them full of adrenaline and when he left they played one of their most incredible sets because they were so energized. And one of the all-time historic moments was when Professor Longhair played with B.B. King, two of the Meters and Roosevelt Sykes."

Davis credits one pop artist with playing a pivotal role in the festival's success.

"One of the things that helped us grow was when Jimmy Buffet, who loves our music and culture, started coming to the festival as a fan and then decided to play," Davis said. "We never thought we could have him because we couldn't afford him, and we still can't afford him, but he played for us anyway. That helped us grow and suddenly people like Santana and Dave Matthews wanted to perform. (Buffet) is an incredible guy who loves the festival and knew if he played it would help us. It was as simple as that."

Looking back at how Jazz Fest evolved into a venue for jazz and rock n' roll together, Wein said it is not how he originally envisioned the festival. But he and the festival had to change with the times.

"I'm a purist, the original traditionalist," Wein said. "I grew up with jazz but if I lived in my ivory tower I wouldn't be 80 years old producing events all over the world."

Copyright, 2005, New Orleans CityBusiness (LA)