

It's a wrap ! Record attendance for this year's Jazz Fest

By JEFF SPEVAK · JUL 1, 2018
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Nine days, could you handle any more? C'mon tough guy, get off the street and get to that 10 o'clock show.

Who's willing to play through the pain at the [Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival](#)? How about that guy who had the Jill Scott tattoo on his arm. Friday night at Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre, he got the singer to sign below her smiling face after her show. By Saturday morning he was at the tattoo shop, making her autograph permanent.

The heat. Ninety-plus degrees. On the closed-off streets Saturday evening, Tower of Power, the horny R&B band celebrating its 50th anniversary, was

bringing the festival to a close with a free show. “Rochester, how’re you doin’?” the band’s Emilio Castillo bellowed from the stage.

“It’s hot out here!” a guy on the street bellowed back. Maybe a few guys bellowed that back. There were tens of thousands of them out there.

And indeed, the heat was oppressive on this final day, with the fire department opening a hydrant at East Avenue and Chestnut Street to cool off overheated festival heads.

Earlier in the day, Co-producer John Nugent was guessing this year’s fest would once again go over 200,000 people in attendance if the usual massive crowd turned out at East and Chesnut. And they got it: Estimates are a record 208,000.

And then the trucks hauled away the garbage, until next year: June 21 through June 29.

The Sandburg soundbag

Matt Wilson hails from Knoxville, Ill., “the avant-garde center of north-central Illinois,” he brags. Carl Sandburg was born in the next town over, Galesburg. The connection between the jazz drummer and the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet is obvious. Why, Wilson says his great aunt was even married to Sandberg’s second cousin.

So Matt Wilson’s Honey and Salt, playing at Kilbourn Hall, had to happen. A band created for the express purpose of performing often-askew jazz music to the venerated words of Sandburg, in particular pieces from his 1963 collection *Honey and Salt*. Dozens of musicians have been reviving the music of the old jazz players at this festival. Why not rescue the work of a poet?



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Yet Sandburg belongs here. Contrary to the popular notion of poets, in his early days he was a bit of a Woody Guthrie, sometimes accompanying himself on guitar during readings. A Pulitzer-prize poet who wrote an important biography of Abraham Lincoln, Sandburg also crossed over into the territory of Harry Smith, who was known for traveling the country in search of folk songs. Sandburg's own anthology, *American Songbag*, was widely hailed on the folk-music scene, and included Pete Seeger among its admirers.

Wilson's five-piece band features Dawn Thomson, married to fest producer John Nugent, on guitar and the bulk of the vocals. Sandburg – who's been dead since 1967 – had his vocal moment as well, with the band playing along with a recording of him reciting his words. "It's fun to jam with Carl," Wilson said, adding that Sandburg loved jazz.

Yet the night sometimes drifted from jazz. “Offering and Rebuff,” with Thomson on vocals, was country.

Sandburg often wrote about Chicago and its laborers, and was heavily involved in the Civil Rights movement and other forward-moving social causes. His poem, “The People, Yes,” includes one of his most-famous lines: “Sometime they’ll give a war and nobody will come.”

“Soup,” which opened the first set Saturday, was considerably less epic on a world scale, yet intimately relatable. It’s about an unnamed celebrity eating a bowl of soup. “When you’re sitting there eating soup,” Wilson said, “you’re just a guy eating soup.”

A poem cutting down the self-aggrandizing humans of the world. As is the case with “We Must Be Polite,” Wilson said, it’s “another one to think about.” Especially the line about the gorilla: “Hey, why don’t you go back to where you came from?”

And there was “Choose,” reflecting how you treat your neighbor, or perhaps an immigrant, or how your country treats another country:

The single clenched fist lifted and ready

Or the open asking hand held out and waiting.

Choose:

For we meet by one or the other

These lines remain timely, Wilson said. Or timeless: “To know silence perfectly is to know music.”

On “As Wave Follows Wave,” Wilson abandoned the drum kit and went to the front of the stage, intoning “Nothing’s more certain than death. Nothing’s

more uncertain than the hour.” Then Thomson and reed player Jeff Lederer joined him for one of the show’s finest moments: Overlapping vocals, like waves washing on the beach. “As wave follows wave... as wave follows wave... as wave follows wave...”

Today’s jazz haiku

Words. Who gives a damn.

They come in waves, anyway.

Silence speaks louder.

Whale of a show

The road from Gypsy jazz to whales calling to each other to Led Zeppelin is about a 60-minute trip.

Sultans of String, the playful Canadian instrumentalists, had a standing-room only crowd at the band’s first set at Temple Theatre. It is four guys, although it gets more complicated from there. Violin, acoustic and electric guitars, bass, drums, handclaps, body slapping, ankle bells and cajón, the percussion box that a drummer sits on, banging out a beat.

And years after it departed for more-profitable waters, Sultans of String even called for a resumption of the Fast Ferry from here to Canada. Superb musicians they are. Mass-transportation experts, they are not.

Yearning to breathe free...

A quiet theme, based on what songs were played, and was said between songs, emerged as the festival unfolded: Commentary on the sad atrocity unfolding on our southern border. Immigrants fleeing Central American countries out of fear for their lives, only to be turned away by the country

whose famous credo, at the base of the Statue of Liberty, reads “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” And as a part of that story, children separated from their parents, as government policy.

So we had Trail of Souls and a gorgeous “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” And Rochester native Robin McKelle – she’s an immigrant herself now, living in Paris – with an original song, “Simple Man,” the story of an immigrant who just wants to make a better life for his family.

At the Harro East Ballroom on Saturday Deva Mahal, the daughter of the legendary Taj Mahal, announced that she and her band were all wearing white in solidarity with the nationwide rallies in support of immigration policy that keeps families together.

And the second set by vibraphonist Joe Locke at Kilbourn, when he told a touching story of how, as a child, he got lost and was briefly separated from his mother, and the terror he felt. When there was some amused laughter – I guess we’ve all been there – Locke reminded the audience that no, *children separated from their families is serious*, and followed with Blind Willie Johnson’s “Motherless Children.”

Jazz Fest Day Nine

My favorite shows at the festival:

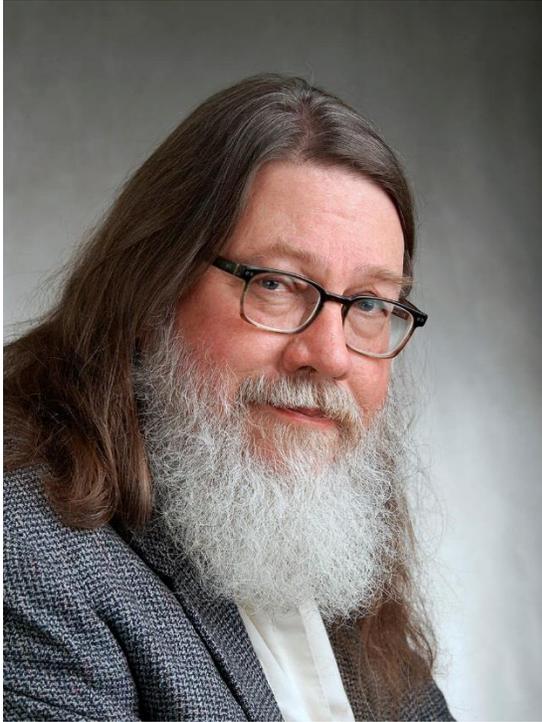
Trail of Souls, first set at Lutheran Church. People drifted out of the venue after this show with a look of amazement and disbelief on their faces: Did we really hear that? A collection of haunting and sad music, Norwegian folk songs, African-American spirituals and words of the doomed poet Anne Sexton, beautifully presented by an amazing singer, Solveig Slettahjell, Knut

Reiersrud's Hendrix-to-a-whisper electric guitar and the Norwegian trio In the Country.

“Songs of Freedom,” first set at Kilbourn Hall. The music of three fearless women – Joni Mitchell, Abbey Lincoln and Nina Simon – in an entertaining and smart show created by the drummer Ulysses Owens, Jr., with two dynamic singers, the technologically innovative Theo Beckmann and the roof-lifting Alicia Olatuja. Some moments were traditional, other times the show was a complete re-thinking of the songs. “Music says everything I need to say, I could think to say,” Owens told his audience. “If there were more people like you on this planet, we could make this thing much better than it is.”

Moon Hooch, first set at The Big Tent. Moon Hooch isn't for everyone. But neither is Charlie Parker. One long, sinuous, burbling 60 minutes of saxophones, drums and technology as propulsive dance-club tools and the occasional contrabass clarinet, well known as a generator of the infamous and perhaps mythical “brown note.”

Joe Locke, first set at Kilbourn Hall. A homecoming for the Rochester-raised vibraphonist, his vibrant playing was matched by his intuitive music; even the instrumentals are inspired by words, he told the audience. And there were words. Along with the Scottish saxophonist Tommy Smith, Locke's guests included the scat-singing singer Paul Jost on a surprising cover, Bob Dylan's “Who Killed Davey Moore?” It's a song about the death of a boxer, and no one taking responsibility. “The metaphor is timely now,” Locke said, “as people pass the buck.”



Jeff Spevak

Gwyneth Herbert, first set at Max of Eastman Place. A show of inventive instrumentation – banjo and an empty beer bottle – humor and humanity that peeled away layers of cynicism. The music is deceptively simple and clever: Winnie the Pooh is “a very familiar quadruped,” she sang. And some of the songs are deep: When she sang of a close friend, Sophia, who took her own life, Herbert’s regret, a simple act unacted upon, lingers: “I wish I’d stayed to tuck you in, for one extra night,” she sang.

The Bad Plus, first set at Temple Theater. Music with the yin and yang of shifting musical landscapes. Melodies spiraling into extremely aggressive behavior by the musicians, rhythms that are the uncertain syncopation of clocks incapable of settling on a time zone.

Jeff Spevak is a Rochester-based writer. His web site is jeffspevak.com.

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