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Happy Jazz Fest!

By: Jennifer Le Carpentier

It's fair to say that Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest have both become synonymous with New Orleans. But if you had to pick one beloved event over the other, why would it be Jazz Fest?

For those in Louisiana, the differences between the two are easily identified but the similarities are there: food, music, costuming, families, spectacular people watching and traditions that run deep. You may be missing the double decker floats, but the Fest even has its own parades, the "second line." "One of the great joys of the Jazz Fest is the odd parade that occasionally takes over the pedestrian paths, bursting through the center of the fairgrounds with an explosion of color, sun-brellas, horns, feathers, and fancy footwork."[1]

The *New York Times* has noted that Jazz Fest has "become inseparable from the culture it presents."[2] It started out as any simple festival, April 22-26, 1970. George Wein, who had success with the popular Newport Jazz and Newport Folk Festivals, was signed on to produce (*he then hired current producer Quint Davis). Wein's concept[3] – a large daytime fair with multiple stages featuring a wide variety of music styles, food booths of Louisiana cuisine, arts and crafts, along with an evening concert series – formed the construct that still takes place annually, rain or shine, the last weekend in April and the first weekend in May.

The initial lineup was small but powerful: Fats Domino, The Meters, The Preservation Hall Jazz Band and Mahalia and Duke, among others. The goal was to put the world on notice to musical and cultural heritage of this city. The festival, originally held in Congo Square, had only 350 people in attendance.

The legendary singer Mahalia Jackson, a native of New Orleans, announced the initial offering of what we know now as the "New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival." What people may not recall is that there was a simultaneous event occurring - the Louisiana Heritage Fair, now held in what is known as Congo Square. Ms. Jackson and her co-headliner, Duke Ellington, joined forces that day to place the table setting for the "JazzFest" we all know and love.[4] Now, almost any act and genre you can think of has taken their place on one of Jazz Fest's 14 stages. For 1972, the festival moved from its former staging at Congo Square to its current home at the beloved Fair Grounds.[5]

In 2001, the Fest celebrated Louis Armstrong's Centennial and shattered records for almost every day of the Fest, including the all-time single-day attendance record of 160,000.00. As of 2023, the 2001 festival still holds the record for highest attendance with a reported audience of 650,000.[6]

[1] https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/fodors/top/features/travel/destinations/unitedstates/louisiana/neworleans/fdrs_feat_110_9.html
[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/arts/music/new-orleans-jazz-festival-50th-anniversary.html
[3] https://www.nojazzfest.com/history
[4] https://www.nojazzfest.com/history
[5] https://www.nojazzfest.com/history
https://www.nojazzfest.com/history[6]

This year's crowd, attracted by the iconic Rolling Stones for their long-awaited Jazz Fest debut, was the second highest attendance reported.

Yet in my humble opinion, there will never be another experience quite like the homecoming that was Jazz Fest 2006. *Los Angeles Times* music writer, Randy Lewis, described one special performance in a way that truly captured the spirit of the 2006 Festival, "Sometime, somewhere, a more dramatic and exhilarating confluence of music with moment may have existed than Bruce Springsteen's appearance tonight at the 37th annual Jazz & Heritage Festival here. But in nearly 40 years of concert-going, I haven't witnessed one." Springsteen also notes in his biography that his 2006 Jazz Fest performance was one of the most memorable and moving of his career.

To supplement the music, Jazz Fest cuisine is a draw for many festival go-ers in and of itself. Nothing demonstrated that more than the clamoring for Crawfish Monica, Cochon De Lait, Soft Shell Crab Po-Boy and Rose Mint tea during Covid and "festing in place." It was another example of this City's ability to pivot while holding on to tradition.

The theme of the food experience at Jazz Fest is "come hungry, try something new, leave really happy."[7] There are about 200 food items at Jazz Fest, this year, from about 60 vendors. A "sampling" of the food both visually and physically shows its global diversity. From Congo Square, you can eat Jama jama, plantains and poulet fricassee. In Heritage Square, you can sample Vietnamese Cuisine. Notably, Chef Francisco Escalona Forth from Colombia will be highlighting his country's cuisine as part of Jazz Fest's Cultural Exchange Program.

If you are looking for even more immersion, culture is also on full display at the Louisiana Folklife Village, Native American Village and the Grandstand. We also now have the International Pavilion that celebrates other cultures (Cuba, Haiti, Panama, Brazil, Martinique, South America and more.

Jazz Fest has been an amazing ambassador to our culture and, much like Mardi Gras, it is lucrative for the City. It is truly a celebration for everyone and that is a win for the city of New Orleans!

[7] https://www.nojazzfest.com/food