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Where Art and Life Meet



Gathering of the Vibes Music Festival 2010 in Bridgeport CT – An Arts Enclave Interview with Festival Director Ken Hays

June 19, 2010 by artsenclave

This is part one of an interview I did with Gathering of the Vibes Festival Director Ken Hays on April 15, 2010. In this part, we talk about the history of the festival and the changing trends in music since he first started out following the Grateful Dead.

If you live in the Northeast and you've never heard of the Gathering of the Vibes music festival, then it's time to tune in. Now getting juiced for its 15th straight year, the Vibes brings an average of 17,000 to 20,000 people a day (July 29 to Aug 1) into its time capsule to the 60s and 70s when Jerry Garcia was so much more than the inspiration for an ice cream flavor.

This year the Vibes Festival is back in Bridgeport, CT, same location as last year when Crosby, Stills and Nash were headliners.

In 2008, I managed a beer tent at the festival and it's probably the closest I will ever come to an experience like Woodstock (which I missed by several years). Four days of an open-air, play-no-matter-what-happens kind of an event, with two main stages and smaller solar stage facing the Long Island Sound. And people just hang loose for a change!



Gathering of the Vibes at Seaside Park, Bridgeport, in 2008 -- Photo courtesy of GOTV

Campers travel from all around the world to plunk themselves down at Seaside Park (right next to University of Bridgeport) and let the weekend unfold. Food vendors are everywhere, and you can wander over to the arts and crafts vendors when you want take a break from the main stage.

And then there's the music...

This summer, some of the headliners are Furthur with Phil Lesh and Bob Weir, Jimmy Cliff, Little Feat, Dark Star Orchestra, New Riders of the Purple Sage and Rhythm Devils featuring Mickey Hart, Bill Kreutzman and Keller Williams. The Vibes homepage gives you the full lineup, which includes the perennial Wavy Gravy (who MC'd Woodstock) as Master of Ceremonies. There's a lot more to say about this fantastic festival, but I'd like to save room for you to hear from the originator and Director of the Festival, Ken Hays. He's a pretty clever guy with a lot of insights into the shifts in the music business.

Vibes Director, Ken Hays - photo courtesy of GOTV

This is part one of an interview I did with Ken on April 15, 2010:

Arts Enclave: Ken, how do you build and hold a following for an event of this size?

Ken Hays: Just about 75-80% of our attendees have been with us for years and they keep coming back and bring the kids. The kids have gotten older—we used to have a real robust kid's corner, and we still have that—but now these kids are in their teens and they don't want to get their faces painted anymore, so we've got musical instruments and teen activities.



AE: So you're passing on the musical thing to the next generation?

KH: That's kinda how we're looking at it...last year with Mom and Dad wanting to see Crosby Stills & Nash and Buddy Guy, and the kids wanting to see Guster and State Radio, and that kind of thing. It's a little something for the old school and for the kids for the next generation. It's kind of a passing of the torch.

AE: You just summed up your shifting demographics...

KH: We've still got our core fan base that loves the Vibes and wouldn't miss it for the world. But at the same time I think it's important to branch out and reach out to people who would be a little outside our demographic, by having Damian Marley and Nas, for example, or Mixmaster Mike of the Beastie Boys....Something a little different, something to keep it fresh and creative, while at the same time making sure that those who have been with us for years are pleased with the lineup.

AE: Talk a little about the history of the Vibes...

KH: It came out of the Grateful Dead following...the seed from which it all stemmed from was the passing of Jerry Garcia in August of 1995. I had been on tour with the Dead for years, and when he passed a lot of people wanted to do a gathering in NY similar to the gathering they had in San Francisco at Golden Gate Park. But when Mayor Guiliani said 'No' to a gathering in Central Park due to the cost (for police, fire, EMS, and cleanup), myself and a couple of friends got together and said 'there needs to be a way that the Deadhead community can come together to celebrate the life of Jerry Garcia and the music of the Grateful Dead.'

AE: You said you had been touring with the Dead?

KH: I had company called, Terrapin Tapes, which was a blank tape and pro audio wholesaler, and we supplied tapes to many of national touring bands—the Allman Brothers, Phish, the Dead, and supplied them with all their blank take media for all the tapers that come to the concerts with microphone and tape deck in hand and traded their live concert performances with others. We supplied their blank media needs, as well as microphones, DAT machines, audio recorders, and that kind of thing. We were very much involved in the Deadhead community since 1991, and this was something we felt we all wanted to do.

Every year, when the Dead would come to town, it would be an annual gathering. We'd call our friends and family that we hadn't seen in a long time and get together at Dead shows throughout the country. And we realized with the passing of Jerry that we weren't going to have the opportunities to meet up at shows and enjoy each other's company anymore. So we held our first one, we called it "Deadhead Heaven—A Gathering of the Tribes," which took place on Memorial Day weekend, 1996. We had about 3500 people at a beautiful gathering of Deadheads. Moe and Max Creek headlined. And it was all we hoped it would be.

We changed the name the following year to the Gathering of the Vibes and the attendance doubled, and we were off to the races...(AE Note: that was the year it was held in my original home village of Croton-on-Hudson, NY)

AE: How long have you been at Seaside Park in Bridgeport?

KH: We were at Seaside Park in '99 and 2000, and then the City of Bridgeport did a major renovation of the park, so we had to leave for that year. They hydroseeded and put down this beautiful ball field, and you can't park cars or camp on recently seeded and landscaped grounds, so we went to upstate NY for 6 years came back in 2007. Now we have a contract to stay at Seaside through summer of 2012, if we choose to do so.

AE: Did your fans follow you when you moved?

KH: They did...A lot of them did. And we picked up a lot of fans from Albany/Duchess region.

AE: How far do people travel to the festival?

They fly in from all over the country, and all over the world, actually. It's something that's real meaningful to them, because this is an annual gathering of friends and family.

AE: What is your "sound"? Obviously originally, it reflected the Grateful Dead, but it's morphed quite a bit, hasn't it?



KH: Absolutely. Over the years, it's really become more about a diversity of genres. The Grateful Dead was a culmination of all different musical genres. Jerry Garcia's love was initially bluegrass, and so we now cover from bluegrass to funk, gospel, to rock n' roll, rhythm & blues, and reggae, and every musical genre. That's been consistent throughout the years. Back in 2003, James Brown was with us, so it's really been an evolution.



Dweezil Zappa played the Vibes in 2008

It's challenging to keep new and fresh artists coming in and not become stagnant and repeat artists year after year. We do have some artists who have been with us from the beginning, but it's important to keep fresh blood coming in and fostering and enhancing the creative musical element.

AE: Who's been with you from the beginning?

KH: Deep Banana Blackout, Reid Genauer from Assembly of Dust (he might have missed one year), Strangefolk has played 13 or 14 Gathering of the Vibes. There are just a few bands that have stayed with us since the beginning.

Deep Banana Blackout - photo courtesy of GOTV

It's appropriate to have Deep Banana Blackout as they are Bridgeport-based and in their heyday they were touring venues throughout the country. Now they come back to play this area very infrequently, just because of family commitments with the band members. But Deep Banana Blackout is one of those bands that step up and shine and they get such an incredible response from people because they really only get the chance to see them once a year...and that's exciting for people.

AE: What does it mean to the band to be in the festival?

KH: We had 2300 band submissions for 2010. It's very, very difficult for bands to break into the larger festivals and that's one of the most difficult parts of our job is to say no, and not be able to extend an invite to so many incredibly talented bands, but there's just limited time available on the stage and we have to be really selective about who we choose. There's an enormous amount of talent out there that we're not able to showcase, which is one of the more difficult things for us.

Look for Part II of this interview in July where Ken talks about how bands can survive in the new social media age of music.

The Gathering of the Vibes takes place in Bridgeport, CT, July 29th – August 1, 2010.

Buy your tickets now!

I talked with Festival Director Ken Hays back in April, first about his concept for the festival (which we covered in an earlier post), and then we got down to talking about how bands survive in this altered music world, where YouTube controls the fates of as many musicians as American Idol. How do you launch with a creative sound and find your listeners, when they are already bombarded with so much else to see and hear? Here's what Ken had to say...

Arts Enclave: What is the Gathering of the Vibes "sound"? We know it originated with the Grateful Dead, but it's morphed quite a bit, hasn't it?

Ken Hays: Absolutely. Over the years, it's really become more about the diversity of genres. The Grateful Dead was a culmination of all different musical genres. Jerry Garcia's love was initially bluegrass and so we now cover everything from bluegrass, funk and gospel to rock n' roll, rhythm & blues, and reggae...every musical genre.

AE: Was it always like that?

KH: That's been consistent throughout the years. Back in 2003, James Brown was with us, and our sound has really been evolving. It's challenging to keep new and fresh artists coming in and not become stagnant and repeat artists year after year. We do have some artists who have been with us from the beginning, but it's important to keep fresh blood coming in, and to foster and enhance the creative musical element.

AE: Who's been with you from the beginning?

KH: There are just a few bands that have stayed with us since the beginning. Deep Banana Blackout, Reid Genauer from Assembly of Dust (he might have missed one year), Strangefolk has played 13 or 14 Gathering of the Vibes.

AE: What does it mean to the band to be in the festival?

KH: We had 2300 band submissions for 2010. It's very, very difficult for bands to break into the larger festivals like ours. One of the most difficult parts of our job is to say 'no'. We hate to not be able to extend an invite to so many incredibly talented bands, but there's just limited time available on the stage and we have to be really selective about who we choose.

AE: All the bands are paid?

KH: We put out a flat guarantee offer to our bands, because it is a festival.

AE: How is this different from other venues?

KH: Traditional indoor concert venues generally offer the band a flat guaranteed amount, like we do, plus, when they reach a breakeven point, there would be a split in percentage—that which goes to the promoter and the venue, and that which goes to the band. So if they sell out a 500-person room, they have the potential to make more than the guarantee. They would make what you would refer to as "back-end percentages." That gives the band motivation to get as many people to show as possible, working with the promoter to try to fill the house. That's the usual concert-venue model, where the band's name alone is the draw for the audience.

AE: And what about your model?

KH: We just do the flat guarantee, but they get the exposure in front of 20,000 people who come to the Gathering of the Vibes Festival each year.

AE: The website looks fantastic. The way you've got the video from last year and the slide show from 2008, it really is pretty inviting.

KH: It is. The website really shows the Vibe, if you will, that we want to get across...that Seaside Park is an absolutely beautiful venue.

AE: Are there special challenges to being in Connecticut?

Connecticut has just taken such a beating in this economic downturn. So many people here were in the finance industry, and then the insurance industry in the Hartford region got hit too. Connecticut has taken a harder beating than most, but hopefully the economy is shifting and people have a little more confidence.

AE: Does that affect your ticket prices?

KH: Absolutely. We put together our budget for the year...and we think about how the economy is looking, where are we at today, and whether people are going to have money to purchase tickets. The whole concert industry has been down pretty significantly and that affects the ticket price for a lot of these bands that go out. Ticket prices determine whether they bands can afford to go out, because if people don't have \$35 to afford the ticket, you know, they're not coming to the show.

AE: What does that do to the bands?

KH: The question becomes, “can a band break even on a lower-priced ticket, say a \$25 dollar ticket?” And can a promoter break even on a lower-priced ticket? A number of bands have decided to be very cautious about their ticket price points, and whether they want to tour the United States this summer. Several have decided to go to Europe instead to branch out and try some new out-of-the-box thinking to expand their fan bases.

AE: The Eagles were doing their Farewell Tour for how many years? And they were sometimes \$200 a ticket.

KH: Yeah, there are very few bands in the world that can demand \$200 a ticket anymore.

AE: And for how long—now they’re on a triple ticket stadium tour with the Dixie Chicks and Keith Urban both opening for them.

KH: Well, it’s supply and demand. And when you have a \$200 ticket and you’re not filling the venues, then that speaks volumes—that you’re priced too high or you’ve played the market too many times.

AE:....Lots of artists cancel tours due to lack of sales.

KH: It’s not that uncommon. People don’t understand, unless they’re in the business. The overhead costs and the expenses incurred by being on the road are so high, with tractor trailers and tour buses and hotels, insurance, and the road crews. If you look at the nuts and bolts behind the music, there are some really considerable expenses that are unavoidable.

AE: Can musicians afford to stay in music or are they going to be forced into other things?

KH: The majority are forced into other things. They end up coming to the understanding that ‘this isn’t working, our love, our passion for the band isn’t getting us to where we need to be...and maybe we all need to sit down together with our finance person and determine if it makes sense for us to continue what we’re doing.’ And maybe it’s some creative, outside-the-box marketing ideas, or a new album that can shake things up. There are so many incredibly talented artists out there that should be playing in front of thousands of people, but it’s a lot of hard work to get to that point.

AE: Do you see solutions in terms of getting their bands noticed out there, trying to break through to another level...Is there a pattern that works better than others?

KH: I think bands are in a special position today with computer downloads and streaming audio. Now there’s new and different marketing ideas, and there’s never been a better time to get their music out to potential fans with Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and all the viral marketing media available. Look where we were five years ago with Facebook and the viral marketing behind bands and look where we’re at today. Just imagine where we’re going to be in five more years...

Music is more accessible than ever before and I think that’s only going to continue. But it’s more than just what you do on the web, you have to rally the grassroots, fan by fan, by signing autographs and shaking hands. You have to do whatever you need to do to survive and thrive as a musical entity. It’s challenging, there’s no doubt about it—it’s a tough, tough business.

AE: What do you think today’s bands should do to promote themselves?

I think I’d go back, honestly to the old concert model...I think it’s a good idea for up-and-coming bands to follow the same kind of model that the Grateful Dead, Allman Brothers and Metallica had, which is to allow their fans to record their concerts and then share those live performances with others...get them intrigued by what the bands are doing onstage, so they’ll come out and buy tickets and check the band out.

AE: Where is music headed? A couple of years ago they were saying because of Napster that the recording industry was going under, and it didn’t actually happen. So where do you think it’s going now?

KH: To make money on CD sales for up-and-coming bands is enormously challenging, unless you’ve got huge, huge marketing and advertising budgets from a major label, which comes with its downsides as well. What I would recommend more than anything is always retaining creative control of your music and intellectual property control of your music. Never give it away.

The labels typically don’t like to give free reign to artists, particularly up-and-coming artists. Once you’ve become a John Mayer (AE: a local boy from just a few miles away), for example, he can retain creative control now, and that was one of his stipulations. As much as you possibly can, try to retain creative control in the studio and make sure the CD or the album that is released reflects exactly what you want it to, and not what a record company executive or an engineer might want.

AE: Any final advice to musicians?

KH:...with record labels, get a good attorney to represent you who has experience in the music recording business—not a lawyer who closes on real estate properties. It's intellectual property and you need an intellectual property attorney who specializes in music rights. It's a negotiating process, but at the end of the day record labels have a whole lot of money, and hopefully you can come to terms that make sense and that both parties are comfortable with.

There's only 12 days left until the Gathering of the Vibes comes to Bridgeport! Visit their site at www.GOVIBES.com to learn more, and check out the first Arts Enclave interview with Ken Hays from last month. [Part II of a Two-Part Interview with Ken Hays](#)

[Click Here for Part I](#)

The Gathering of the Vibes music festival is primed to rock 'n roll into its 15th season honoring Jerry the Garcia, and introducing thousands of new fans to bands with great vibes of their own.

[Gathering of the Vibes Director Talks About Surviving in the Music World](#)

July 17, 2010 by artsenclave

[Part II of a Two-Part Interview with Ken Hays](#)

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The Gathering of the Vibes music festival is primed to rock 'n roll into its 15th season honoring Jerry the Garcia, and introducing thousands of new fans to bands with great vibes of their own.

There's food, arts and crafts, sunshine (and sometimes rain) at Seaside Park in Bridgeport Connecticut. And for four days, the air above the shores of Long Island Sound will be filled with music you rarely get the opportunity to hear live. Bands like Furthur with Phil Lesh and Bob Weir, Jimmy Cliff, Little Feat, Dark Star Orchestra, New Riders of the Purple Sage and Rhythm Devils featuring Mickey Hart, Bill Kreutzman and Keller Williams. The Vibes homepage gives you the full lineup, which includes the perennial Wavy Gravy (who MC'd Woodstock) as VIBES Master of Ceremonies