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A Festival Carries the Torch of the Grateful Dead

By TAMMY LA GORCE
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DEADHEADS may not lack an instinct to gather, but they do require a good reason for doing so. For decades, Jerry Garcia, the [Grateful Dead's](#) frontman, gave them one.

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Jane's Addiction, with Perry Farrell and Dave Navarro.

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Furthur, with Phil Lesh, left, and Bob Weir.

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Chad Batka for The New York Times
Elvis Costello and the Imposters.

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When Garcia died, in 1995, Ken Hays was not content to let the once-itinerant herds of his fellow fans disband unceremoniously. So he started the annual festival that became [Gathering of the Vibes](#), to be held July 21 to 24 this year at Seaside Park in Bridgeport.

Mr. Hays, 47, started the event out of sentimentality and a sense of devotion. "I've seen around 360 Grateful Dead shows in my life, and I made a lot of friends — we needed a way to stay in touch after Jerry Garcia died," he said after wrapping up work on the recent Greenwich Town Party, a festival that his Bridgeport company, Baseline Productions, had helped produce.

"There are a lot of festivals out there," Mr. Hays said, "but we truly are the only one remaining that keeps the torch of the Grateful Dead alive and burning strong."

That strength is revealed not just through loyalty — a congregation of regulars has been dubbed the "vibe tribe" — but also in numbers. Last year, 20,000 people per day trekked to Bridgeport for the festival, more than half of them campers and 15 percent of them from west of Ohio. The same number is expected to pile into Seaside Park this year.

For Phil Lesh, the former bassist for the Grateful Dead and now a member of [Furthur](#), a two-year-old band he formed with Bob Weir, the Dead's former guitarist, the festival is "like going home."

"I love to play the Vibes," said Mr. Lesh, 71, of Marin

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John Werner

The Rhythm Devils, with Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart.

County, Calif. "The people who come are really tuned into our music and what we're trying to do with it." Further will play the festival for the second consecutive year. "It's a great way to reconnect with the Heads. I really enjoy them."

That does not mean that everyone who attends is a Dead show veteran or even old enough to recognize the names Phil Lesh and Jerry Garcia. The three-stage festival has always been a multi-genre event, Mr. Hays said; July's headliners include [Elvis Costello and the Imposters](#) and [Jane's Addiction](#), both alternative acts, and the bluesy [John Butler Trio](#), in addition to the [Rhythm Devils](#), which

features the drummers [Mickey Hart](#) and [Bill Kreutzmann](#) — both former Grateful Dead players. In all, more than 40 bands will play. Several are from Connecticut, and one, the Bridgeport-based funk act Deep Banana Blackout, has not missed a Gathering of the Vibes since the event's inception.

"We really pride ourselves on the diversity of the lineup, because that's consistent with Jerry Garcia's love of all kinds of music," Mr. Hays said. "We're known as a hippie festival or a jam band festival because of where we came from, but we've had everything from funk to bluegrass to gospel. The only thing we haven't had is heavy metal."

That all-encompassing lineup includes music for children, because a lot of Deadheads and their fellow festivalgoers are parents now: around 3,000 Gathering of the Vibes attendees are expected to be under age 12 this year. For them, there has long been a "kids' center," coupled with an area for older children called "Teen Scene," but this year the festival will also offer a [School of Rock](#) teen stage, where established Vibes artists will jam with budding rock stars.




For the fifth consecutive year, Gathering of the Vibes will take place at the 370-acre Seaside Park, but, since its inception, the festival has bounced to New York venues in cities including Croton-on-Hudson, Red Hook and Mariaville. This had less to do with the festival wearing out its welcome than with its popularity.

After its inaugural year at the [State University of New York](#) in Purchase, in 1996, the festival moved to Croton-on-Hudson, but that site, too, lasted only a year. "We outgrew Croton Point Park," Mr. Hays said. "Then we went to upstate New York and it continued to grow, so we brought it home to Fairfield County." Specifically, to Seaside Park in 1999. But after two successful years in Bridgeport, the festival was again forced to wander when the park underwent renovations. "Now we've got a contract so we can be there through 2012," Mr. Hays said. "It's become a stunningly beautiful place for the festival."

Stephen Perkins, the drummer for Jane's Addiction, would not know about that — this is his band's first year playing Gathering of the Vibes. What he is fairly certain of, though, is that based on its reputation, it will be a fitting place for them to play.

"We've always had a thread in that community, with the Grateful Dead and some of the jam bands, because Jane's likes to stretch things out when we play, not just stick to the actual arrangements on a record," Mr. Perkins, 43, said. "What I'm feeling is that people there are going to like watching bands that take chances onstage. We can be spontaneous and unpredictable. We're really going to pull from that environment."

Local charities also benefit from the festival. "We have a whole lot of nonprofits from Bridgeport and Fairfield County on site," Mr. Hays said, part of a "sustainability village"

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given over to organizations that usually include [Oxfam](#) and [Greenpeace](#). "Last year a couple of Bridgeport firefighters passed away in the line of duty, and the fire chief called me and said, 'Hey, Ken, we'd like to do a boot drive.' Basically, firefighters came holding fire boots, and people would take their change and throw it down into the boots. We raised a little over \$25,000 that went directly to the firefighters' families."

This year, Mr. Hays expects the festival's annual food drive to pull in more than 15,000 pounds of nonperishables for three [food pantries](#) in Fairfield County.

The same spirit of giving back is behind a 50 percent discount on Sundays, reducing the admission fee to \$20, for veterans and for Connecticut residents. "You know, Connecticut has that reputation of being so incredibly wealthy," Mr. Hays said, "but a lot of people are hurting out there. It's touchy times. This is our way of letting people let go of their daily concerns and worries and sit back in a beautiful waterfront park and listen to music at a price that's incredibly fair."

Along the way, they may end up witnessing a couple of milestones. On Sunday morning, the Gathering will attempt to break two Guinness world records: one for the most kazoo players at one time and the other for the most hula hoopers at one time. "P. T. Barnum built Seaside Park," Mr. Hays said. "We thought it would be a neat way to remember him."

Gathering of the Vibes, July 21 to 24 at Seaside Park in Bridgeport; tickets range from \$40 for a day pass on Sunday (\$20 for veterans and for Connecticut residents with ID) to \$420 for weekend V.I.P. passes, which include camping, hot showers, meals and beverages. A Vibes NYC bus, \$20 per ticket, will run from Bridgeport to Manhattan after the music at 1:30 a.m. on July 23 and 24. For tickets and information: govibes.com.

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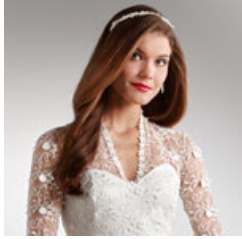
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