

# INSIDE THE HYDE PARK JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY JUDITH E. STEIN

Hyde Park Jazz Festival Co-Chair

Chicago is a festival town. So when, in 2007, the Hyde Park Jazz Society was approached by the Hyde Park Alliance for Arts & Culture (HyPa) to talk about putting on a jazz festival, we thought, "Why not?" A brainstorming meeting among the HyPa cultural leaders, the University of Chicago, and the Hyde Park Jazz Society in early 2007 gave birth to a planning committee for Hyde Park's first jazz festival. It wasn't the birth that was tough; it was the growing up that got tricky.

Born out of an interest in promoting the cultural and arts organizations in the greater Hyde Park area, HyPa, was looking for a means to entice people into visiting its member organizations, some of which include The Smart Museum, The Hyde Park Art Center, Little Black Pearl, and Robie House. They reasoned that jazz in their venues could be a way to broaden their outreach. Our fledgling Hyde Park Jazz Society was eager for a high profile opportunity to promote jazz in the neighborhood. Having little clue what it would take to mount a Festival, we were ready to roll. We figured that what we lacked in knowledge, we could make up in enthusiasm, commitment, and energy.

Before we could go forward, however, we needed a commitment from some headliners to assure all parties that this would be a "real" festival. Jim Wagner, the founder and president of the Hyde Park Jazz Society invited Willie Pickens to perform, and I invited Orbert Davis. Both musicians were available and happy to accommodate us. We had our headliners, and thus the first Hyde Park Jazz Festival was taking its baby steps. Next we looked to Carolyn Albritton to bring more musicians on board. Carolyn was successfully booking most of the music for the Hyde Park Jazz Society's Sunday evening jazz series. She was the only one of our entire planning committee who had professional experience in the world of music; everyone else was on a steep learning curve.

Our start-up committee included jazz aficionados--those who had vivid memories of a city and a neighborhood filled with jazz from Mr. Kelly's and the London House to the Beehive and Sutherland; who had been regular attendees of the Monterey Jazz Festival; who spoke knowingly of the Jazz Showcase when it was on Rush Street in the '60's; and those who had never attended a jazz festival or heard of the Jazz Record Mart; who didn't know swing from free style or WDCB from WNUA. But we all came together with a vision of what we wanted:

jazz in the streets, in the museums, on the Midway, and all through Hyde Park, a community bound by music while discovering the offerings of Hyde Park.

With a core group of seven, we took on fundraising and ad sales (no “free” festival is ever free), advertising and promotion, transportation (how to move audience members from one part of the neighborhood to another, up to two miles away); tee shirt and poster sales; and volunteers. It didn’t take long to realize that festival planning is about far more than music. In fact, the music became the “easy” part as Carolyn was able to sign all of the musicians we had decided to invite within several weeks. Almost all the musicians whom she booked for the Festival had performed the previous year for the Hyde Park Jazz Society in its former location at the Checkerboard. They trusted that Carolyn and the Hyde Park Jazz Society would create a Festival worth playing.

Aside from finding money for this 15 hour enterprise, a major challenge was logistics. In our first year, with eight venues, the organizers, the audiences, and the musicians had to face the problem of getting from the DuSable Museum at 11:00am to the Midway Plaisance to The Hyde Park Art Center and to five other locations in between. The University of Chicago came to our rescue with a transit system that allowed attendees to park once and take a trolley to a distant location. Blessed with postcard pretty weather, we Festival organizers breathed a huge sigh of relief as most jazz fans opted to walk to the different venues. When lines were too long for audiences to get into small venues like Robie House, temporary friendships were formed and jazz conversations sprang up between strangers. What had seemed like an impossibly large number of venues—eight in our first year—filled to capacity, sending even more people into the streets and back to the Midway.

Experienced festival-goers knew to bring chairs, food, and beverages. Others discovered that we had only one food vendor who never came up for air in her 10 hours on the Midway. We corrected that problem in our second year with food offerings and a beer and wine garden. The Hyde Park Art Center had the final scheduled performers before the midnight jam session, but it soon became too crowded to let everyone in. So people sat on the sidewalk and grass and then spilled into the street on a perfect fall evening with the sounds of Willie Pickens’s piano and Corey Wilkes’s trumpet filling the night air. After Sax in the City closed out the evening at the Midway stage, I had to give the audience the news that there was no more room at the Art Center. Some clever audience members raced over to the Checkerboard to get seats in advance of the Midnight Jam that was to be held there. The rest of the crowds had to put Festival Number Two on their calendar for 2008. The First Hyde Park

Jazz Festival, which opened with Orbert Davis asking the crowd to listen carefully as he blew “the first note at the first hour of the first Hyde Park Jazz Festival,” was now at an end.

Musically contented, but regretfully, they drifted into the warm fall night. Recalling that amazing day and evening, Festival co-chair, Lauren Moltz, says, “There is a sense of creating something for the first time, watching it unfold and not knowing what the outcome will be, that is certainly anxiety-producing, but also very exciting. I knew the Festival would attract a crowd because of our great line up and peoples' love of jazz, but I really didn't predict the overwhelming response, not just in terms of numbers, but in attitude. To know that I was part of a small group who helped create that was a high.”

Fast forward to 2008 for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Hyde Park Jazz Festival. We started planning earlier, had more help, yet were just as frantic as the previous year. For our second Festival, we added four venues, bringing our total to twelve. We expanded the number of featured groups from 16 to 28, and we brought in food and beer & wine vendors. Our first year crowds of 5,000 tripled to 15,000 under, again, exquisite blue skies. When asked about our Festival, drummer Ernie Adams commented, “After working at different fests around the world, I love this here—just across town. It's in a big city, but it's not too large—not too small either. A perfect size.” While the organizers agree with Ernie, we also believe “three is a charm,” so this year on September 26<sup>th</sup>, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Hyde Park Jazz Festival will have additional stages, some new venues, and 34 groups--all in one fifteen hour day.

For more information, contact [hydeparkjazzfestival.org](http://hydeparkjazzfestival.org).