

27TH RUSSIAN RIVER JAZZ FESTIVAL

AUGUST 2003

JOHNSON'S BEACH, GUERNVILLE

TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

The Russian River held its 27th annual riverfront jazz festival Jazz on the River this year and Island-Life sent a pair of reporters to check on the scene on Johnson's Beach in the tiny hamlet of Guerneville, which also hosts a long-running Blues Festival in early Summer. We have to say, the Festival provided a mix of responses, especially as we interviewed a number of locals and long-term attendees, including one couple which has attended every festival for the past eighteen years.



As we filed onto the beach area, hearing the first act, Lavay Smith and the Red Hot Skillet Lickers come and go for their 90 minute set (from outside the gates) and officials announced that this was the largest crowd in the 27-year history of the festival to the long line waiting to enter, it became clear that the event has outgrown its venue limitations or requires serious revamping of its procedures.

In a typical misunderstanding, our photographer left his equipment behind for the first day, with the understanding that "no recording equipment of any kind would be permitted".

On the second day, the organizers were forced to postpone the event start for an hour and rescind a major rule against "high-back" chairs when a number of ticket-holders (\$50-\$100 per) practically staged a riot at the gates.

On entering it also became quite clear that booking to the max in this once tiny and little-known venue was a serious mistake, only mitigated by the fact that jazz fans of this type are extremely accommodating and willing to suffer all kinds of indignities "for the sake of the music."

Well over 6,000 persons got admitted to the beach on Saturday and everyone said that this was the largest crowd ever assembled. Well, the lineup for Saturday ran as follows: Lavay Smith (Swing jazz), Bobby Hutcherson with Cedar Walton and his Quartet, Ledisi, Stanley Clarke and George Benson.

Quibbles aside, the organizers did an amazing job of conducting a first-rate affair up along the Russian River in an area more known for redwoods and

fishing than sophisticated jazz, and putting 6,000 people into a town that is four blocks long and two wide is no mean feat.

The venue itself is a virtual donation of property by the local Harris family. It is a small gravel and sand beach about 150 yards long and about 50 wide, terraced up into trees on a hill. The far boundary of the river has a low dam. A line of canoes is tied into a broad arc to shield swimmers from people renting canoes and kayaks to view the music from offshore. A portion of the beach has been bulldozed out to make a "kiddie pool".

No glass of any kind is allowed and this is probably the only restriction that is seriously enforced.

People along the beach have easy access to the water, but almost no one there -- probably about 2,000 people -- can see the stage. A very large VIP area is assigned for the best view positions before the stage. Security kept the aisles in front and to the stage clear at all times with amazing efficiency.

On to the main purpose of the event. Lavay Smith performs regularly in Babylon at Cafe du Norde, so we can always catch her energetic and subtly self-ironic take on jump-swing at any time. Smith, master of a musical style popular when her father was but a gleam in her grandfather's eye, has a rich, warm contralto reminiscent of Vera Lynn and possessed of such a natural quality that most singers attempting such material use electronic means to alter the sound. Still, it would have been nice to have seen her in action again after her CD and the sudden popularity instead of standing in line to enter the grounds for 2 hours.

Fortunately, we did arrive in time to see and hear the amazing Ledisi perform as well as the Bobby Hutcherson Quartet.



Hutcherson and the quartet finished off with a ten-minute long improv jam that rocked the crowd, with Cedar Walton, Eddie Marshall and Ray Drummond.

The relative newcomer, Ledisi, had quite a formidable task in following such masters as these, but she quickly stormed the crowd, dressed in cool white under a beating 95 degree sun.



Ledisi had been recommended to us by insider Tom York, but this was the first time we had the opportunity of observing this extraordinary talent demonstrate the fire within.

She comped well on an up-tempo version of "Yesterday" then went into a funk-heavy "Get Out of My Kitchen", a song from her new CD "Soul Singer", getting the crowd to sing along with her after she taught them the words. During a spirited "Looking for Jamaica", she jumped into the air and spun around several times and really got the crowd moving on "Free Again." Long lines formed in front of the booth where she signed copies of her latest work.

Ledisi also was featured performer at the recent AIDS walk.

When Stanley Clarke took the stage, he had quite an act to follow, for Ledisi had nothing to lose in anything she did. Clarke, who is the pre-eminent jazz bassist in the world, had no problem blasting the crowd with a high high voltage performance featuring an extraordinary electronic violinist and a second

bassist from the Camaroons. At one point, the man from western Africa said simply, "Everybody stand up now."



And all 6,000 people did so. All at once. Even the people in canoes and in the water.

People that stayed for mainliner George Benson reported that Benson preformed better than he had in years with awesome energy.

For the second day, the organizers postponed the start of the music, realizing that people would have rioted over missing large portions of a concert paid for half a year and more in advance. Consequently, we got to enjoy the end of the set by the Orquesta La Moderna Tradicion, the only band in the United States devoted to classical Cuban dance music.



After settling in to our spot with our low-back chairs and non-glass containers, we enjoyed the smooth jazz of Joyce Cooling, who was finishing up her long tour with this event.



Brian Culbertson, another newcomer to the jazz scene has been scene as a proponent of that illegitimate child called "smooth jazz", which is also sometimes termed "elevator music."



Let us say only that Culbertson blew the doors off of the place with such an high voltage display of energy, you could have powered Brooklyn Heights for a year with the amount of electricity the guy put out. He was all over the stage, jumping off of the drum dias, blowing a trombone at the backdrop, at the bass player, at the clarinet player and the at the crowd with such industry you had to wonder where the devil did anyone come up with such a label as "smooth jazz" for such frenetic activity.



When the bass player said, "It's time for you to get up now," it seemed like the roof was going to lift off of the sky. These were people waiting for Al Jarreau to show up, and this band made them forget all about it, no question.

Our investigation team had to leave before mainliners Norman Brown and Al Jarreau, but reports have it that this was the most successful Festival ever with unexpectedly high energy performances turned in by all comers.



