

Music Lovers Reunite At Capital Jazz Fest 2021



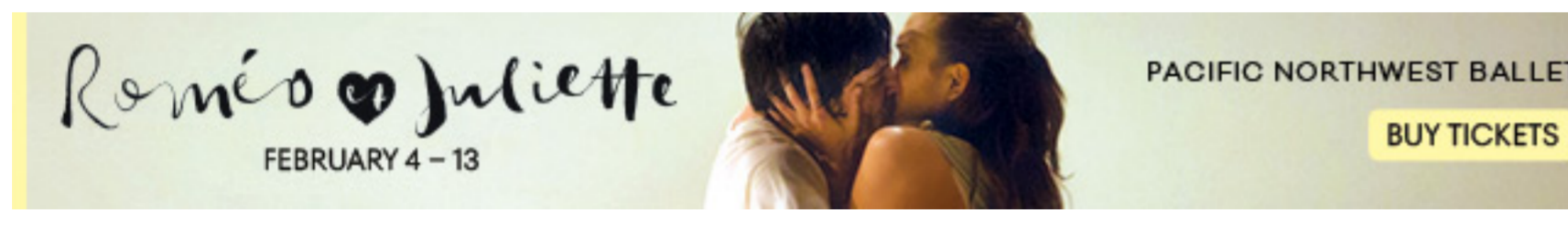
By Dwight Brown, NNPA News Wire Travel Writer

After a 24-month COVID hibernation, the Capital Jazz Fest reconvened as a special edition at Merriweather Park in Symphony Woods in Columbia, Maryland. Normally an annual June event, which was canceled in 2020, the fest took place on September 4th and 5th—with a few modifications.

Entry required proof of a COVID vaccination, or a negative test taken within the last 72 hours along with a valid ID. Also, in past years there were two venues in the park, one a sprawling lawn with a stage and no seats, the other the Merriweather Post Pavilion amphitheater, which had stadium seating and behind that section a rolling hill where people could bring chairs and view the main event. This year everyone congregated in the amphitheater, ready to party, bringing that good vibe that has been an integral part of the festival for over 28 years.

Saturday the roster started with electric violinist Ken Ford, jazz harpist Mariea Antionette, smooth jazz singer/pianist Jarrod Lawson and the lively vocalist Avery Sunshine. The proceedings kicked into a higher gear when Grammy-nominated singer/songwriter Eric Roberson brought his soul licks and sly sense of humor on stage and captured the audience's attention with his signature song "Lessons." "All the heartbreak I had led me to you." His funny but heartwarming set led to the much-anticipated Bill Withers Tribute, with a band that included famed bassist Marcus Miller.

Anthony David ("Words") sang Withers' "Grandma's Hands," with the heartfelt conviction of a seasoned R&B singer. Roberson re-emerged singing the sassy "Kissing My Love." Miller reminisced about being a young studio bass player on the recording of Withers' classic "Just the Two of Us." Evidently, Withers taught himself to play the guitar and the first song he wrote, knowing only a few chords, was "Ain't No Sunshine." Withers' first attempt at playing the piano conjured up "Lean on Me." Not bad for a beginner.

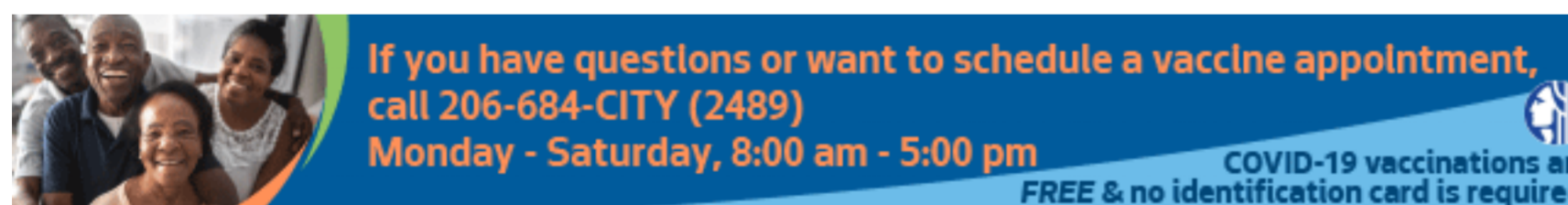


South African jazz great Jonathan Butler wailed and cooed on "Ain't No Sunshine" and was called into action by Miller to sing "Just the Two of Us." At this point it was hard to imagine who would come out next, but the festival is known for its musical tributes and the crowd was ready for big surprises. They roared when Patti Austin came out to sing her version of "Lean on Me." They went ballistic when Eric Benet strolled onstage for funky up versions of "Use Me" and "Lovely Day."

The first evening was capped off with romantic soul singer Will Downing performing his own hits and soul classics like "Stop, Look, Listen (To your Heart)," first recorded by The Stylistics. His act peaked when Maysa, former lead singer of Incognito, walked out to duet with him on the Michael Jackson tune "I Can't Help It," which they reinterpreted with jazz styling and scat singing. The night's headliner was the sultry voiced Lalah Hathaway, who appeared in tight black leather pants, an oversized white blouse with black blotches and looked very modern. Her first comment to the crowd, "You all don't know how bad I was missing you!" She crooned many songs, including Anita Baker's "Angel." Her most touching moment featured the contemplative love song "Insanity," which she sang with Gregory Porter on his LP "Take Me to the Alley." "How did we ever lose our minds and fall apart, knowing we're the only ones to heal each other's hearts?"

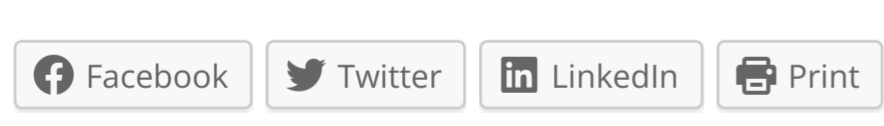
Sunday's lineup was as stellar. Starting with Zo! & Tall Black Guy (featuring Deborah Bond), followed by Stokely, Shanice, Chanté Moore and Sheila E. The evening began with Tamia, who confessed to the audience: "COVID sucks. I lost friends and family." Wearing Daisy Dukes frayed blue jean cutoffs, the voice of the 46-year-old singer was as supple and clear as when she first made her debut splash on Quincy Jones' 1995 *Jook Joint* LP with her Grammy-winning performance "You Put a Move on My Heart." She was followed by the return of the very debonair and California free spirit Eric Benet. After singing some of his top songs, and a very smooth version of The System's classic "Don't Disturb This Groove," he focused on a duet he did with Tamia, which turned out to be his 1997 breakout song: "Spend My Life with You." His anecdote, about hiring her to do the song as a ruse to get to "know" her, and then on the day of recording being disappointed when she showed up with her lover basketball great Grant Hill, made the audience howl with laughter.

As the festival concluded, Bell Biv DeVoe, former members of New Edition, took the stage in a high-voltage hip-hop review complete with dancers, gyrations and an MC who had the audience in a frenzy long before the group showed up. The d-jay played classic soul and hip-hop music from the '70s, '80' and '90s and he yelled, "If you have hip-hop in your heart make some noise!" The place went wild. "If there is anyone in the house over 45, let me hear you scream." The cheers were deafening. Bodies were moving, swaying and dancing like it was an end of summer backyard party.



The crowd that flocked to the special edition Labor Day weekend Capital Jazz Fest had a good time as they socialized, met old friends and new ones too. COVID had ruined many things over the last 18 months, but this fest is how thousands of music fans got their groove back.

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