

District Gets Kudos for Gumbo Ya Ya

Written by Jimmie Jones

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It's a shame when musicians who perform America's original art forms – jazz, blues, and other African-American musics such as gospel and zydeco – tell us that their music is much more respected and appreciated in Europe and Japan than in this country. In many of those countries, America's art form is supported by the government, including small towns with festivals, concert-hall performances, and educational clinics for schoolchildren featuring America's top musicians.

 In comparison, our national, state, and city governments do very little to promote and educate our citizens on America's culture. When the Republicans took over Congress during the Clinton administration, many legislators wanted to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts; although that didn't happen, funding for the NEA was drastically cut. In recent years, Iowa and Illinois have provided limited funding for the arts, but now – with budget problems in both states – funding for the arts will be the first and foremost to take cuts.

 There are exceptions in which governments or community leaders do provide support for the arts in a worthwhile manner. For more than 20 years, the City of Chicago has been providing free jazz and blues festivals that the city advertises as the largest in the world. Downtown Iowa City businesses put on an annual free Iowa City Jazz Festival, which features some of the top jazz bands and musicians in the world. This year's festival, scheduled for July 5 through 7, features jazz legends Cedar Walton, David "Fathead" Newman, Curtis

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Fuller, Louis Hayes, Malachi Thompson Freebop Band, and Lavay Smith & Her Red Hot Skillet Lickers.

 The Quad Cities should take pride in the Rock Island District's annual Gumbo Ya Ya festival. Although there is not a radio station in the Quad Cities area that plays zydeco or Cajun music regularly, the District brought nine high-quality Cajun and zydeco bands all the way from Louisiana to perform at the 10th annual festival on June 7 and 8. Charging only seven dollars for adults, the festival attracted 25,000 fans to enjoy music they seldom if ever get to hear. I witnessed dozens of young fathers and mothers dancing with their sons and daughters ages two to 12, and couples young and old as well as children by themselves were dancing all over The District.

 Bands included two of the best in zydeco music in Nathan & The Zydeco Cha Chas and Rose Ledet, both of whom have been headliners at the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival. One of the highlights of the festival was the pride displayed by Nathan Williams when he featured his highly talented 15-year-old son, Nathan Jr., for three numbers on accordion and vocals. I was also impressed by the singing of Donna Angelle. Rose Ledet told me that Donna , who is 20 years her senior, was also her mentor.

 Of course, The District brought them together at Gumbo Ya Ya, and it's one of the few examples of civic leaders giving local audiences a chance to see such talented artists in one place.