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Williamstown Jazz Festival to debut with three days of music, films and conversation

By Kate Villinski, Eagle correspondent
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Cuban-American jazz artist Arturo Sandoval, pictured in 2024, will perform at the inaugural Williamstown Jazz Festival.
Pete Marovich -- Getty Images

WILLIAMSTOWN — A new three-day jazz festival will make its debut Sept. 11, bringing nationally known musicians, student ensembles, films and community events to venues across Williamstown.

The inaugural Williamstown Jazz Festival, organized by the nonprofit Jazz in the Berkshires, will feature performances at the Clark Art Institute and Williams College, along with a film program at Images Cinema.

The lineup includes the Brandee Younger Trio, Steve Turre's All-Star Band, The Cookers and Arturo Sandoval and his octet. Berkshire performers and ensembles will include the Wanda Houston Quartet, the Berkshire Youth Jazz Ensemble, the MCLA Jazz Ensemble, Richard Stanmeyer & Company and

Triangle Offense. The Connie Han Trio was originally announced as a performer, but Lisa Fischer, a two-time Grammy-winning vocalist with the Rolling Stones for 26 years, will perform instead.

For Jazz in the Berkshires founder and Executive Director Daphne Bolden, the festival is intended not only to bring jazz to the region but also to draw attention to the Berkshires' place in the music's history.

"Almost nobody knows the Berkshires were the site of the first jazz schools of instruction in the world," Bolden said.

If you go

What: Williamstown Jazz Festival

When: Sept. 11-13

Where: The Clark Art Institute, Williams College and Images Cinema in Williamstown

Tickets: \$310 for a full-festival pass; \$85 to \$200 for individual day passes

Information: jazzintheberkshires.org

Those schools attracted or helped develop musicians including Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson, Jimmy Giuffre, Ray Brown and Kenny Dorham.

Bolden, a longtime jazz musician and enthusiast, returned to the Berkshires from California in 2017 with her husband, Williams College alum Anthony Boskovich. She said the region's history and active arts community helped inspire the creation of Jazz in the Berkshires.

The organization hopes the festival will become an annual or biennial event and serve as its primary summer program. Future festivals could also include workshops and other educational offerings.

Jazz in the Berkshires has presented two concerts a year at The Clark for the past three years. Organizers say the September festival will be considerably larger, with an anticipated total attendance of more than 1,000 over three days.

Education is one of the nonprofit's central goals. The festival program includes the Berkshire Youth Jazz Ensemble and the MCLA Jazz Ensemble, placing student musicians on the same schedule as experienced local and national performers.

Organizers also sought variety in the performers' ages, genders, musical styles and instruments.

"If you like jazz, you'll find something that you like at the jazz festival," said Will Schmenner, The Clark's head of public programs.

Ashley Paradis, director of programming for the Berkshire Youth Jazz Ensemble and a band director and music teacher at Pittsfield High School, plans to bring at least three ensembles to the festival.

The students will perform music they selected and rehearsed during the school year, along with pieces that have become favorites within their classes. The festival will provide the ensembles with their largest performance venue to date after appearances at smaller local venues, including the Stationery Factory in Dalton.

Paradis, who also serves on the board of the Massachusetts Music Educators Association, said she had not imagined an opportunity of this size when she began working as a music educator.

The student performances will illustrate both the beginnings of a musical education and where it can lead, she said.

Trumpeter Richard Stanmeyer, who will also perform at the festival, said appearing on a program with prominent jazz musicians gives the event added significance.

“This festival has a lot of weight because of the lineup,” he said. “Being in that kind of environment is humbling.”

The festival arrives during a summer in which FreshGrass and the Williamstown Theatre Festival are not presenting their customary programming. Bolden said she viewed those changes not as added pressure but as an opportunity for the new event.

“It wasn’t extra pressure,” she said. “It was an opening.”

Schmenner said the festival should be viewed in terms of what it will add to the region’s cultural offerings.

“People in the Berkshires will get to see jazz they wouldn’t have seen otherwise and leave the festival hungry for more,” he said.

Berkshire singer Wanda Houston will appear with her quartet at 4 p.m. Sept. 13. Houston said she is particularly looking forward to meeting and spending time with other musicians.

“For me, so much of it is about the interaction backstage and meeting people,” she said. “When I’m backstage, I’m myself.”

Saxophonist Kris Allen, a member of Triangle Offense and director of the Williams College Jazz Ensemble, also said festivals create unusual opportunities for musicians to connect outside their own groups.

“A festival such as this one is a unique social opportunity for musicians, insofar as there are three or four groups playing on the same stage on the same day,” Allen said.

Images Cinema will host the festival's Saturday afternoon film program, "Rhythm & Reels," which will feature jazz documentaries and performance footage in the cinema's renovated main theater.

Images Executive Director Dan Hudson said the theater is assisting with the program's curation, while festival organizers will make the final film selections.

Other venues include The Clark, Williams College's '62 Center for Theatre and Dance and Chapin Hall.

Gina Puc, Williams' director of community relations, said the college is coordinating its venues and logistical resources with the festival's schedule. The locations are within walking distance of one another, allowing visitors to move between performances and Williamstown's downtown businesses.

"Vibrant cultural experiences are essential to driving regional tourism and boosting foot traffic for our downtown businesses," Puc said.

Peter MacGillivray of Provisions Williamstown said summer cultural events have helped define the town for decades. Businesses that could benefit from festival traffic include Spring Street Market & Cafe, the Barn Kitchen & Bar, Crust and the Print Shop.

In addition to ticketed performances and films, the festival will include a free Vendor Village with food, arts and crafts, live music and a fire-dancing performance.

Full-festival passes cost \$310. Individual day passes range from \$85 to \$200.

This story has been updated to say that 1,000 people (not 9,000) are expected to attend the course of the weekend-long festival. Also, Bolden and her husband moved to the Berkshires from California in 2017, not 2015.