

Early ambition and optimism

BY NED BEKAVAC

The Guelph Jazz Festival may not be for everyone, but it can be for anyone.

The musical gathering brings edgy and avant-garde artists and the fans who love them to the Royal City each year.

But it's not just the sophisticated music geeks who fall in love with the challenging sounds the festival delivers to thousands of ears annually.

"This is not a something-for-everyone festival like some of the other festivals in Canada," says Ajay Heble, artistic director of the Guelph Jazz Festival.

"But what I have found over the years is that even if you think the kind of music we're presenting might not be for you, I think you'll be amazed."

Heble recalls a Guelph Jazz Festival gig by William Parker, the New York City free jazz player.

It was a morning concert, more than a decade ago, at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre.

Heble is fond of a particular post-show reaction that day.

"I remember one woman coming up to me saying: 'I have never heard of William Parker. I didn't know who he was. I came because I read the article in the newspaper. And I was in tears.'"

Heble pauses, and adds: "So just hearing from people . . . obviously the aficionados is one thing, but to hear from people in the community, how impacted they were by what they were hearing, to me that's a sign that we're doing something right."

By all accounts, they've been doing it right for two decades now.

The Guelph Jazz Festival this year celebrates its 20th anniversary.

Heble is excited about the milestone.

"It's a chance to celebrate what we've achieved thus far, and we look forward to another 20 years," he says.

Heble promises surprises for the 20th annual event. The lineup is expected to be announced in May or June.

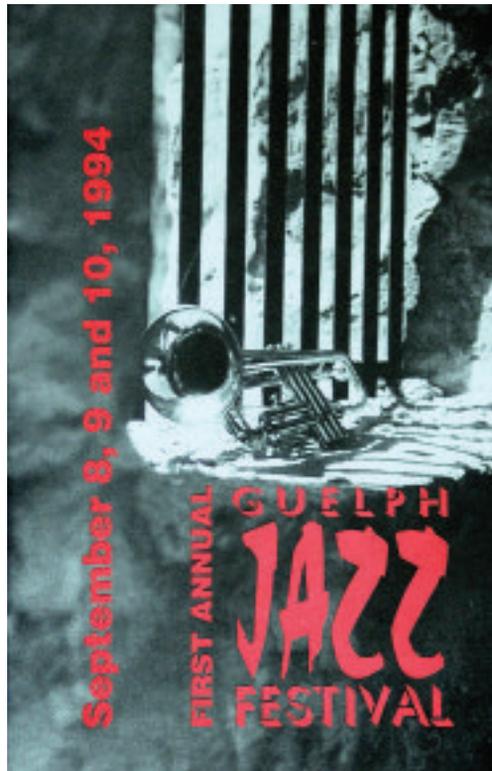
The Guelph Jazz Festival got its start in 1994. The plan was hatched after Heble got talking with some like-minded friends.

Things went swimmingly from the get-go.

The inaugural festival, smaller than the one celebrated these days, saw performances at places like St. George's Anglican Church and venues at the University of Guelph.

St. George's Square was used, too, as the popular outdoor tent that graces the festival these days had yet to exist.

"The first year we did really well. We had a small surplus. We were thrilled . . . because we didn't know. We really didn't know," says



Guelph Jazz Festival's first program

Heble.

Not that everyone was head over heels for the music being presented.

"In the early years of the festival, people would come expecting Dixieland and they wouldn't get it – so they would walk out," Heble says with a laugh.

While the undertaking was huge, and new, for he and his cronies there was no shortage of confidence that it would succeed.

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The festival's first program, after all, has the word "annual" on it, Heble notes.

"It was perhaps a bit presumptuous, but ambitious and optimistic," he says.

Heble was born in New York City and raised in Toronto. He grew up listening to classical music and started studying piano at a young age.

When he moved here in the early '90s, he was pretty sure a city like Guelph could and would embrace such a festival.

"I always felt that this was a community that would support this event," says Heble, who teaches at the University of Guelph. "When I arrived here this was already a town that had a reputation for presenting great music."

While the festival was an early hit for music aficionados from all over the world, it took a few years for it to make a dent in the consciousness of the local people.

A galvanizing moment took place when the festival was three or four years old.

"We got a fantastic review in the *Globe and Mail*," Heble recalls. "The review said something like: 'One of the most visionary musical events in Canada.'"

He continues: "And I think at that moment people locally started to say 'Oh, there's something going on in our own backyard' " that's pretty great.

"It's one of those situations where the festival developed a really strong international reputation earlier than it established a reputation locally."

For Heble, that was an initial goal, jelling international and local flavour.

That light bulb really lit for him one day, way back, at a restaurant in Quebec.

Heble was there attending the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville. "I remember the first time I went there I was surrounded by people from all over the world. And the people in the community didn't really seem to know what was going on," says Heble.

"I'm sitting in a restaurant eating dinner and I said: 'Oh I'd like to get to a concert. Do you think we can have our dinner quickly?'"

"And the woman looked at me and said: 'Concert? Here in Victoriaville?'"

The entire restaurant was full of people from Japan, New York – you name it. They were all there to check out the music.

But the festival went on unbeknownst to lots of the locals, Heble says.

"It was interesting that Victoriaville was largely based on the kind of international audience, whereas what I wanted to do was combine that international flavour with a desire to stay rooted in the local community."

"That was really central to my vision."

Another of Heble's visions, from day one, was to annually deliver music that many might consider to be a tad, well, weird.

"There was no shortage of other festivals happening all over Ontario," he says.

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pay big dividends for Guelph



Ajay Heble says the festival is driven by artistic vision and not commercial or mainstream interests

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“There really wasn’t a venue, or an opportunity, for artists who are more on the edge. The vision was to try to provide a stage for artists who are doing more innovative, avant-garde, creative, improvised music.”

It’s a template organizers live by to this day.

“The festival has been driven by artistic vision, not by commercial or mainstream interests,” says Heble.

“I think we’ve been pretty uncompromising, to be honest.”

Being uncompromising, of course, can bring financial challenges.

“A lot of the other festivals, even when they seem to have a kind of commitment to more experimental forms of music, they’ll usually balance that with some kind of mainstream act that will help pay for the edgier stuff,” says Heble.

“That’s not the model we’ve used. We program stuff that we feel really strongly about.”

The artistic director, who says he is supremely grateful for all the funding the festival receives, admits the festival has had some lean years in the past, but today it is

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healthy financially.

In recent years, the critically acclaimed event has added Nuit Blanche, which features overnight entertainment, and it’s been a huge hit with fans.

“People tell me they’ve never seen the city come alive like that – and it’s happening at three in the morning,” says Heble.

Approximately 250 volunteers, along with staffers, help make the festival tick each time out.

While the annual celebration is, and is supposed to be, about the music, it has become much, much more than that, Heble says.

“I’ve often said that the festival is about the music, of course, but for me it’s more about reinvigorating public life with the spirit of community and dialogue,” says Heble.

He looks forward to seeing people from all over the world – and Guelph, of course – at the annual bash.

“There is a tremendous community that’s formed. There is a real sense of that. It’s almost like a family,” he says.

“These people from all around the world come back every year. It’s like seeing old friends.”

Heble talks about how that community had a huge impact on him, personally, some five years ago.

On a flight back from France in 2008, he suffered a heart attack.

“It was totally out of the blue,” he says.

The reaction of the Guelph Jazz Festival family helped him recover, he says, and today he’s all well.

“The tremendous outpouring of support, it was really important for my healing process,” Heble says. “I really felt that spirit and community, and it helped me get through a difficult time.”

The 20th annual Guelph Jazz Festival takes place Sept. 4 to 8, 2013.

