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Takoma Park cures the summertime blues

Old Town holds 15th annual JazzFest

by Karl Herchenroeder | Special to the Gazette

In the midst of a muggy weekend, world-class jazz and blues offered a breath of fresh air along Carroll Avenue in Old Town Takoma Park during the 2010 JazzFest.

"I love it. I was just in St. Louis, and jazz is big there. Jazz is big in this town too," said Jenie Holmes, who traveled from California to avoid missing JazzFest on Sunday.

Holmes, who lived in Takoma Park for 32 years, said she has seen the festival grow each summer. This weekend, she had a front row seat under a shady tree at the Willow Street Stage, where internationally renowned musicians Chuck Redd and Jeremy Pelt headlined with the DC Jazz All Stars.

"We want to get everybody out of their houses and experience new things downtown. We also want to connect communities like Langley [Park], Takoma [Park] and D.C.," said Bruce Krohmer, producer of JazzFest.

Krohmer has been involved with JazzFest since its inception. After a year as producer, he stepped down in 2004 only to take the reins again in 2008 when the festival was moved from Jequie Park to the business district. Since that move, Krohmer says attendance has tripled. They were expecting between 3,000 and 4,000 for 2010.

Accompanying the music were dozens of tents from local stores and food vendors. Anything from arts and crafts and face painting to jewelry, artwork and records could be found as residents danced their way along the steaming pavement.

"It's great. We come here usually every year," Jainava Emanuel of Hillandale said as her 2-year-old daughter shook her maraca to the music playing at the Gazebo Stage.

"I like to play at different settings with an array of different people. Outdoor events are a ton of fun. You don't get to see little kids in nightclubs," said Cathy Ponton King who grew up in Hyattsville and headlined at the Gazebo Stage with her electric blues band.

At the Willow Street Stage, Craig Schenk of Fairfax was grooving to Clarence "Blues Man" Turner's take of "Hoochie Coochie Man".

"Jazz and blues fit good together," said Schenk during the festival's first year incorporating blues. "Every Takoma Park festival has been fun. It's always a good time."

"I love being able to play in my hometown," said Redd. "JazzFest is getting to be a nationally recognized festival. Giving [Takoma Park] more credibility."

Redd, an accomplished drummer and vibraphonist, has been on 13 extensive European tours and five tours of Japan since 1980. Krohmer said Redd is a major reason the festival has been able to raise the level of artistic ability each year.

"At large, the [national] jazz scene is relatively tight-knit," said Redd. "The D.C. scene is recognized. It has an interesting history beginning with Duke Ellington."

Ellington, the legendary D.C. musician, helped propel jazz to the national stage in the 1930's.

Krohmer says jazz festivals are really important to the heritage of the United States. It has roots in the 1600s and is considered to be the only original American art form.

"It makes me feel good that people are still trying to start events. It's important to the jazz community," said Redd.