

NEWPORT JAZZ AND FOLK FESTIVALS

Wein recalls the highs and lows



Jacqueline Marqu ♦ Daily News staff

Longtime Newport folk and jazz festival producer George Wein, left, and Newport Daily News reporter Jim Gillis team up on Thursday to talk about past festivals. The jazz festival begins tonight.

By Sean Flynn
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — Charles Roberts, producer of First Night Newport until its demise last year, asked George Wein, the country's most successful producer of jazz and folk festivals, what made him become a producer.

"I was always an organizer, whether it was getting together a baseball team as a kid or gathering musicians I could play the piano with," Wein said.

At 84, the impresario is still planning, still organizing. He said he goes to sleep considering ways to turn the Newport folk and jazz festivals into nonprofit enterprises.

"I'm trying to think how I'm going to save these festivals, so they continue after I'm gone," he said.

Roberts was one of more than 100 people who attended "Reminiscing in Tempo: Reflections on the Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals," on Thursday afternoon

ALSO

♦ Jazz festival parking and ticket information. **A8**

at Salve Regina University's McKillop Library. Wein and Newport Daily News reporter Jim Gillis recalled high and low moments of the festivals over the years and discussed their impact on the city. It was one of the BridgeFest 2010 events that took place Monday through Thursday between last weekend's folk festival and this weekend's jazz festival.

While Wein had center stage as the raconteur, Gillis often stepped in to put the stories into context or serve as a memory prod.

"Now what year did I return to Newport, Jim?" Wein asked.

"1982," Gillis said.

"Thank you, Jim."

"That's why I'm here, George."

WEIN **A8**

Wein

Continued from A1

The Newport City Council canceled the festivals in 1971 after a crowd of youth stormed the fences around Festival Field in order to take the stage and open it up to "free music."

"I had somehow picked up all the pieces after the disruption of 1960; could I do it again?" Wein wrote in his book, "Myself Among Others." "I wasn't sure. All I knew was that Newport was finished." There had been a riot outside Freebody Park in 1960, which led to the cancellation of the festivals in 1962. Wein returned the next year.

When he came back to Newport after the decade-long break in the 1970s, the festivals were moved to Fort Adams State Park.

"I liked the openness around the fort and not needing a fence," Wein said. "It is the most beautiful site for a festival."

The Newport festivals have had many shining moments since the 1980s, and both Wein and Gillis agreed that last weekend's folk festival was among the best.

Since he put on the first jazz festival in 1954 with the support of Louis and Elaine Lorillard and the first folk festival in 1959, Wein recalled moments when many in the city did not accept him.

"When we first came to Newport, we had a tough time," Wein said. "People did not want the festivals."

That has turned around. The music festivals are high points of the city's summer season and drivers for the local tourism economy. The city has declared Aug. 7 "George Wein Day."

"You'll never know what this means to me," he said at the end of the discussion. "I'm very humble. I'm still doing what I love. I thank you for that."

But before he wound down with those words, Wein and Gillis traded memories for close to two hours.

Of course, Wein's memories went back further.

A man in the audience asked Wein to talk about Duke Ellington's legendary performance at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival, which is credited with reviving Ellington's career.

The Ellington band played "Diminuendo in Blue" and "Crescendo in Blue" with tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves playing solo between the pieces. Ellington told him to keep going until he was told to stop, which was 27 choruses later. Around the seventh chorus, a young blond woman in a black dress got up and began to dance in the aisle. Others joined her, and soon hundreds of people were jitterbugging wildly.

Wein recalled that he was worried about things getting out of control and tried to get

TO GO

The CareFusion Newport Jazz Festival will open tonight at 8 at the International Tennis Hall of Fame with British singer/pianist Jamie Cullum and Boston-area saxophonist Grace Kelley. The festival will move to Fort Adams State Park, where performances will take place on three stages, Saturday and Sunday from 11:30 a.m.-7 p.m.

Tickets for tonight's show range from \$40 for south stands to \$100 for premium box seats. Reserved seats at Fort Adams cost between \$85 and \$100. General admission to Fort Adams costs \$69 in advance or \$75 at the gate if available, and \$15 for children 3 to 15 years old.

Children younger than 3 will be admitted free. A limited number of two-day adult passes are available for \$125 and are available for online purchase only.

On-site parking costs \$12 per vehicle in advance or \$15 on festival weekend.

Tickets are available at Empire Tea and Coffee at 22 Broadway, the Newport Visitors Center at 23 America's Cup Ave., at Ticketmaster.com or by calling 1-800-745-3000.

For more information, go to newportjazzfest.net.

COMING UP

Weekend: It's been 50 years since riots nearly spelled the end of the jazz festival.

'I always treated the musicians as professionals. They are earning their living playing music. I gave them the best stage and sound we could give them.'

GEORGE WEIN

Newport folk and jazz festival producer

Ellington to stop.

"He got Johnny Hodges to play a slow piece to bring the crowd down," Wein said.

On the recording of that performance, Wein can be heard telling Ellington: "That's it! End of story!" Ellington can be heard saying, "One more. We can do one more."

"It was biggest night of Duke's later life," Wein said.

Gillis said one of Wein's great talents is his ability to bring together musicians of varying styles and getting them to work together.

"Tony Bennett can be on the same bill as Ornette Coleman," he said.

"I always treated the musicians as professionals," Wein said. "They are earning their living playing music. I gave them the best stage and sound we could give them."

Things did not always work out, Wein said. He remembered arranging with Louis Armstrong's manager a finale that would feature Ella Fitzgerald and other musicians joining Armstrong on stage. Instead, Armstrong broke into the national anthem and said, "Good night."

"Afterwards I heard him yelling at the manager, 'You run the business and I run the music,'" Wein said.

Miles Davis was on the trumpet and Thelonious Monk on the piano playing "Round Midnight" in a jam session at a festival in the 1950s, Wein said.

"It was the most beautiful thing in the festival," he said.

"Tell Theolonius he played the wrong changes," Wein recalled Davis telling him.

"Miles, he wrote the song," Wein responded.

During the discussion, Wein paused a couple of times and said, "Jim, where are we going now?"

Gillis pointed out that Wein discovered a lot of musicians in those early years, some coming north for the first time for the Newport festivals.

"They had never been out of the Delta," Gillis said.

Wein has staged festivals in cities around the country, including the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, and festivals around the world.

He remembered being in Japan with saxophonist Stan Getz, one of his favorite musicians to listen to, but difficult to work with because of his involvement with drugs and what he did to get those drugs.

"How is it you are so evil and play so beautifully?" Wein said he asked him. "But Stan Getz was a nice guy underneath the drugs."

The discussion was not all about the past. Wein also spent time looking forward, savoring the turnout and audience at the festival last weekend and hoping for similar crowds this weekend.

"Seventy percent of the crowd was 18 to 30 years old," he said. "They were the most well-behaved kids you could imagine. It was like the passing of the baton to another generation."

Send reporter Sean Flynn e-mail at Flynn@NewportRI.com.