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### JAZZ

## Saving the Jazz Fest

By Howard Reich

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If you love the Chicago Jazz Festival, the news that City Hall plans to shorten the event to three days from four might seem unfortunate.

But if you consider the fest a dubiously produced, semipro affair sorely in need of reinvention—as I do—the reduction might not appear so bad.

Either way, the city's intention to reconceive all the free, summertime music festivals, due to budget constraints, could be an unexpected blessing for jazz listeners. Here's why:

For most of its 30 years, the Chicago Jazz Festival has suffered from programming budgets that were stagnant at best, shriveling at worst. Because the festival depends primarily on the kindness of cash-strapped City Hall (and the sponsors it attracts), the event now limps along with a laughably small entertainment budget of approximately \$250,000.

That means Chicago's event lags far behind younger, more entrepreneurial fests that don't rely primarily on governmental largesse, such as the Montreal International Jazz Festival (programming budget of \$10.6 million) and the San Francisco Jazz Festival (\$1 million).

Even so, through considerable ingenuity, the Mayor's Office of Special Events, which produces the Chicago Jazz Festival, and the non-profit Jazz Institute of Chicago, which programs it, have presented illustrious lineups. For the 30th anniversary festival, last summer, luminaries such as Ornette Coleman, Dee Dee Bridgewater and Dave Douglas held the stage.

The problem? Most of the major concerts unfolded in the Petrillo Music Shell, an acoustical black hole that subjects audiences to murky, wildly unpredictable sound. Moreover, visitors sit in a sea of folding chairs amid a roar of constant conversation, eating, drinking, you-name-it. A great listening experience it's not.

The current budget crisis means the Mayor's Office of Special Events will be re-examining the Grant Park summer music festivals top to bottom, "opening all options, getting out of the cookie-cutter format," executive director Megan McDonald told the Tribune last week.

In essence, then, the Chicago Jazz Festival faces two options: Progressively shrink with each new budget cut, or re-imagine itself to attract new audiences in new venues, supported by new streams of revenue.

A few significant, strategic moves could yet bring this fest up to 21st Century standards (or close to it). Here are some possibilities:

*1. Soft-pedal the Petrillo.* This summer, for the first time, the Chicago Jazz Festival opened not at the Petrillo Music Shell but in the glorious Pritzker Pavilion of Millennium Park, thanks to the cooperation of the city's Department of

Cultural Affairs (which operates it). Sonny Rollins, arguably the biggest star in jazz, played to an audience of about 13,000 listeners comfortably seated in and around a superb outdoor listening environment. Can there be any doubt that additional festival events ought to unfold at the Pritzker? The Petrillo still can play a role, but a significantly diminished one.

*2. Improve or bulldoze the side stages.* The only venues less inviting than the Petrillo Music Shell are the nearby Jazz on Jackson and Jazz & Heritage stages, which offer daytime events. Do you enjoy baking for hours under the scorching sun while standing on Jackson Boulevard? Or standing inside—or outside—a tent too small for the crowds it draws? Listening to music on speakers that compete with the din of sirens, planes, helicopters and the like? Surely listeners deserve something better.

*3. Explore new venues.* In recent years, the Jazz Institute has invented a Chicago Jazz Festival Week, with pre-fest events in clubs and concert halls leading up to the main event at the Petrillo. But a redefined Chicago Jazz Festival should make these performances, and others, part and parcel of the festival itself. In other words, the event ought to embrace spots such as the Chicago Cultural Center and various neighborhood rooms, just as the World Music Festival, the Hyde Park Jazz Festival, the Chicago Humanities Festival, the Umbrella Music Festival and others have done to tremendous success. The one-venue-fits-all approach to festival production has become obsolete for jazz, a fact recognized in Montreal and San Francisco but not yet in Chicago.

*4. Appoint an artistic or executive director.* Every major musical institution—from Jazz at Lincoln Center to the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival to Symphony Center—has one. Why not the Chicago Jazz Festival? Perhaps only a single vision could succeed in helping the festival evolve from a vaudeville show in Grant Park to a multifaceted event unfolding in parks, clubs and concert halls. Two obvious candidates (who may not welcome the impromptu nominations): Lauren Deutsch, executive director of the Jazz Institute of Chicago, and Michael Orlove, senior programmer at the city's Department of Cultural Affairs.

*5. Expand the brain trust.* Everyone knows the Jazz Institute of Chicago has done excellent work in booking the festival, in its current, anachronistic form. By virtue of both tradition and expertise, the organization deserves a principal place at the (programming) table. But creative folks at Chicago's many jazz venues and organizations—from the Jazz Showcase to the Morse Theatre, from the Umbrella Music Festival to the Harris Theater—ought to be part of the equation too, at least if they are to become sites for a re-imagined festival. Their input—and their box-office potential—ought to be welcomed.

Any or all of these ideas (and others, as well) could enrich the Chicago Jazz Festival and, one hopes, expand its base of financial and advertising support. Or we could just sit back and watch the fest—which used to run seven days—shrink to three ... two ... one ... zero.

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