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Kevin Yeanoplos

Grateful Dead alive and well at Gathering of the Vibes



Further's Bob Weir plays Gathering of the Vibes 2011. Photo credit: Gathering of the Vibes

Time waits for no one. And there may be *no one* that understands that better than dutiful Grateful Dead fans, who on Aug. 9 will mark the 17th anniversary of Jerry Garcia's untimely passing.

It's hard to believe that it's been that long but let's face it, there's a multitude of misguided youth that have never even heard of the gifted guitarist – outside of a double scoop of “sugaree” sweetness at Ben & Jerry's. While a few drifted everlastingly into the musical wilderness with Garcia's passing, dedicated Deadheads simply viewed the rock icon's death as the first night of an extended celestial road trip. And for them, this summer is a time to celebrate the 17th year of the Gathering of the Vibes, July 19-22. GOV founder Ken Hays recently took the time to chat with me about “his baby.” Shortly after Garcia died in 1995, New England businessman and Grateful Dead buff Hays

gathered some friends together to throw a memorial party for the late musician on the campus of SUNY Purchase.

Aptly named “Deadhead Heaven – A Gathering of the Tribe,” the event provided a forum for music lovers to celebrate Garcia’s life and reunite for a weekend of spiritual renewal. The festival relocated to Croton Point Park, N.Y. and was re-named “Gathering of the Vibes.” The rest, they say, is history.

In each year since, the Vibes has carried forward the spirit of those initial events by creating wholly unique musical experiences for attendees from far and wide. The affectionately known “Vibe Tribe” comes to the Vibes annually to build and renew bonds of friendship.

The annual music, arts and camping festival has grown into a four-day fete featuring such world-class talent as Crosby, Stills & Nash, the living members of the Grateful Dead, the Allman Brothers Band, James Brown, the Black Crowes, Buddy Guy and many more big names. The Vibes has also showcased extraordinarily talented, up-and-coming bands.

Given the Dead’s laid-back reputation, Hays has learned a somewhat envisaged lesson over the festival’s long history. “Always expect the unexpected. You know, always plan for hurricane-type weather conditions, even if it’s sunny and 80 degrees out (laughing).”

Held in six different venues over its 17 year history, GOV 2012 returns to Seaside Park in Bridgeport, Conn. for the eighth time, making it the Vibes’ venue of choice. And as Hays related, it’s hard not to like a little property on the water.

“To have two and a half miles of Long Island Sound oceanfront is just a beautiful thing and really what makes gathering of the vibes and Seaside Park unique.”

The festival’s exceptional setting isn’t the only thing that sets it apart. I was surprised to learn that Hays wasn’t aiming for a Woodstock-sized gathering.

“We’ve gone larger. This is our 17th year and we’ve had up to 40,000 people. I don’t ever want to do that again. You lose the intimacy. The families with their kids don’t feel as safe and comfortable as they do in a more intimate 20,000 person setting.”

“And that’s something that we really pride ourselves in – year after year, the number of parents that bring their kids is increasing significantly. And I just think that’s an indication of how safe they feel and what a positive experience it is not only for their kids but for the bonding that they have together.”

Hays didn’t hesitate with an answer when I asked him about what makes the Vibes so extraordinary. “What differentiates the Gathering of the Vibes from, honestly, all other types of music camping festivals would be the number of parents that come with their kids year after year. Last year we had 2,000 kids under the age of 15 that came with their parents. Two thousand out of 20. Ten percent of the attendees came with their parents, camped out.”

“It used to be, back in the late ‘90s, all we had was a kids’ corner where kids got their faces painted and made tie dye shirts. But now we have had – for the last five, six, seven years – the teen scene.”

“These kids that have been coming to Vibes for years, they’re teenagers now and they don’t want to have their faces painted. We have musical instruction provided by the School of Rock and all these interactive activities for teens, such as Meyer Sound.”

“Last year is the first year they did it. If a teenager doesn’t have the interest in playing guitar or singing but has great interest in how a soundboard works, how a lighting board works, we have instructors, lighting engineers and audio engineers that are teaching these kids what it all takes.”

“So, it separates us from everyone else. I think it’s the support and love around the family and the growth and watching these kids year after year grow up and become young adults and have a passion for live music and community.”

As a veteran Deadhead, Hays is smart enough to know that some Grateful Dead fans occasionally partake of an herbal remedy or two – all medicinal of course. But after 17 years of the Vibes, Hays has it covered.

“Look, whenever you gather twenty thousand people for a music concert or festival, there’s gonna be people who are smoking pot. It’s a reality in our culture right now and I don’t anticipate that changing.”

“The Kids’ Corner and Teen Scene is absolutely alcohol free, drug free, peanut free, all the allergens. And then there’s a family camping area where only families are allowed and there’s no noise permitted after 9 p.m. There’re wash basins and showers right next to it.”

“There’s actually a playground in there with swing sets and whole bunch of cool kid’s activities, right in that area under the trees. And you can still hear the music from your campsite, so it’s really a beautiful spot.”

“When it comes to the issue of alcohol and drugs and kids going too far, or young adults and adults going too far with indulging, it’s something that I’ve been dealing with for the 17 years that Gathering of the Vibes have been around.”

“But there’s an upside to it as well, which is that everyone’s safe first and foremost but secondly, I have over the years gotten hundreds, literally hundreds of emails and letters and phone calls from parents who brought their 13, 14, 15-year-old kids.”

“And they’re out in the general camp outside of the family camping and they smelled pot in the air and the kids said, ‘What is that smell?’ And it opens up the dialogue between the parent and their child, which is a difficult dialogue to have, which is that of drugs and alcohol.”

“It opens up a dialogue and I think that’s what we need more so now. We can’t have teachers talking about this type of thing. This is a parental discussion that I think is essential for parents to have with teens.”

Over the years, the Vibes has offered a diverse lineup – this year is no different – but there’s method to Hays’ madness. He hasn’t tried to have something for everyone.

“No, not really. I kind of look at it similar to how Jerry looked at music. And how he’s quoted his love of bluegrass, his love of folk, of straight up rock and roll and the Allman Brothers Band. And he loved gospel and blues.”

“You know, we get a brain storming session – alright, let’s put a lineup of our A list and see if we can actually pull it off. But diversity is king and that’s something that we really strive for. Last year, having Jane’s Addiction and Elvis Costello was a treat.”

Last year may have been good, but Hays and his crew have outdone themselves again for 2012. Just take a look at this year’s lineup – and get your ticket here

<http://gatheringofthevibes.com/vibes-ticket-packages-2> while they last:

PRIMUS • PHIL LESH & FRIENDS • BOB WEIR & BRUCE HORNSBY WITH SPECIAL GUEST BRANFORD MARSALIS • STS9 • 7 WALKERS FEATURING BILL KREUTZMANN • MICKEY HART BAND • STRANGEFOLK REUNION • YONDER MOUNTAIN STRING BAND • STEEL PULSE • ZAPPA PLAYS ZAPPA • THE AVETT BROTHERS • THE GREYBOY ALLSTARS • GEORGE PORTER JR. & RUNNIN’ PARDNERS • KELLER WILLIAMS • DARK STAR ORCHESTRA • MATES OF STATE • DEEP BANANA BLACKOUT • ALO • RYAN MONTBLEAU BAND • MAX CREEK • ASSEMBLY OF DUST • ZACH DEPUTY • KUNG FU • JOE PUG • TOUBAB KREWE • THE STEPKIDS • OUTERNATIONAL • BAD RABBITS • DAVID GANS • THE MCLOVINS • DANGERMUFFIN & YARN • DOPAPOD • COSMIC JIBAROS • TWIDDLE • BAND TOGETHER • ANDY THE MUSIC MAN • LUCID • THE PRIMATE FIASCO • QUINCY MUMFORD & THE REASON WHY • MIZ • SCHOOL OF ROCK TEEN VIBES STAGE WITH MASTER OF CEREMONIES WAVY GRAVY!