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Music, American-style

Free outdoor concerts mark annual Port Jefferson festival of sounds

By **Dave Willinger**

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The annual American Music Festival in Port Jefferson is expected to attract thousands of visitors and music fans to the village this weekend. Based on those numbers, the popularity of the event – which this year features Peter Tork, Miles to Dayton, Jay Scott, and the Kerry Kearney Band among others – is unassailable.

For the first time, the festival will also feature a stage on East Main Street, where merchants have complained in the past about being left out of the festivities. At the same time, some have complained about vendors setting up outdoor tables that compete with established commercial district stores.

Retail intrigues aside, a full slate of awesome musical talent awaits visitors this weekend.

Buck stops here

Zydeco is culture and roots music, according to Stanley Dural, the accordion-playing front man better known to fans as Buckwheat Zydeco. His seven-piece band, including washboard, will perform a full set of Louisiana foot-stomping party music. Dural will play both the accordion and his original instrument, the Hammond B3 organ.

Buck, as friends call him, said he mixes in something for everyone, including country and western and covers of Fats Domino (a childhood idol) and the Rolling Stones. The audience will also hear traces of funk and R&B, the music Dural played in the early 1970s with his first band, Buckwheat and the Hitchhikers.

It was not until after he joined Clifton Chenier's zydeco band later that decade that Buck "parked" the Hammond in favor of the accordion and formed Buckwheat Zydeco. Inspired by Chenier, he even sang lead vocals for the first time.

The transition was not hard, he said, because while growing up, Dural had heard his father play the accordion "so much, morning, night and lunch." His father, a good friend of Chenier's, had always wanted Dural to play the accordion, and Dural admitted that he resisted stubbornly for a long time.

With his success on the accordion, Dural and his father became best friends, Dural said. As for the band, it's become an acclaimed interpreter of zydeco, that up-tempo Louisiana music popularized by black and multiracial French Creoles in the 1800s. Buckwheat Zydeco tours the country and abroad, and Dural – who also speaks French Creole – said talking to the folks in Quebec or France reminds him of his Louisiana home.

American acoustic

Their style is listed as "folk" in the American Music Festival's official program, but there will be no "kum ba yah" sing-alongs during the performance by singer-songwriter duo Martha Trachtenberg and Tom Griffith, who prefer to call their music "American acoustic." The husband-and-wife team may have somewhat divergent musical influences – Trachtenberg mentions Joni Mitchell and classical music, while Griffith cites Jimi Hendrix and Cream – but both agree that good writing is the main focus of their craft.

Griffith said they are "not from the Pete Seeger cloth," but more akin to Richard Shindel, Dar Williams and Lucy Kaplansky.

Griffith's 2007 CD "40 Years Later" was named that year's Best Indie CD from Long Island by Newsday and Trachtenberg's 1999 release "It's About Time" still gets air play locally, the musicians said.

Trachtenberg and Griffith, who also comprise half of the band Return to the Dream, will bring their acoustic six-strings to the East Main Street stage Saturday afternoon, singing original songs about love, work, raising a family, long relationships and careers, among other topics. Some of the songs come from "something happening in my life," Trachtenberg said, others are "pure fiction."

She said she's seen audience members weep at their poignant lyrics, and called that "satisfying." That crying game will begin an hour earlier than originally scheduled, at 4 pm on the East Main Street stage, with Gathering Time taking over the 5 pm slot.

Gail advisory

For 1940s jump blues and even older standards, get to the East Main Street stage at 1 pm Saturday, when vocalist and keyboardist Gail Storm brings her unique style to the festival.

That style includes special harmonies with right-hand chords, Storm said, and in particular "a heavy left hand," which translates into a different base line and "extra punctuation for bass notes." Storm, a classically trained pianist, will play on her Yamaha electric keyboard, but said she rarely uses any setting other than regular piano.

As for her singing, Storm said she emphasizes the emotions in the stories being told, singing in a manner to ensure she's "sharing the feelings."

He writes the songs

John Flor is "an outstanding songwriter," in the view of promoter James Faith. Listed as a "folk/rock artist," John-Flor Sisante — his full name — describes his sound as "indie music influenced by Simon and Garfunkel and

Postal Service."

His mother began teaching Sisante to play the piano when he was 5. Now 28, he has also learned the saxophone and the guitar. He'll play guitar Saturday, singing original songs about relationships, childhood and even some "fun/party" tunes he wrote about such "superstars" as Natalie Portman and Britney Spears.

Sisante is a native Long Islander and was voted "most musical" of his senior class at St. Anthony's High School in south Huntington. His music, which he said ranges from acoustic to electro-pop, is familiar to patrons of Cool Beans and Deepwells Mansion in St. James.

But Sisante, whose lyrics often confront deeper questions, such as "how free are you, really," also plays New York City venues including the Living Room. He's scheduled for the East Main Street stage on Sunday at 4 pm.

Tyros take the stage

The Sheppard Brothers philosophy was summed up earlier this week by 11-year-old keyboardist Camara: "We play everything we can get our hands on to attract a lot of people."

Camara said he has been playing for five years and listed Herbie Hancock and Stevie Wonder among his influences. Older brother Kenya, 13, the band's guitarist, said Dave

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Brubek's "Take Five" is a favorite of the band, and one likely to be performed Saturday when they take the Main Harbor stage at 1 pm.

Kenya also cites Hendrix as a major influence, but said it's not so much about replicating Jimi's many techniques, but trying to "catch his style and make it my own."

Rounding out the precocious and eloquent trio is schoolmate Ryan McCluskey, 15, who plays the drums. Ryan said his father, also a drummer, has been the major influence on his playing style, but he also admires Police drummer Stewart Copeland.

Clarence Sheppard, the father of two-thirds of the band, attributes the group's success to the boys' dedication and talent. The elder Sheppard said the group plays jazz, blues, funk and R&B, while he is relegated to the role of roadie, packing up their equipment after a gig, while they invariably run off to play.

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