

Tim Jackson, General Manager of the Monterey Jazz Festival

IN 1958, 67 LOCAL BUSINESSES DONATED \$100 EACH TO FUND THE FIRST Monterey Jazz Festival. That year, audiences were treated to performances by jazz legends such as Dizzy Gillespie and Billie Holiday. Since then, on every third weekend in September, Monterey, California, has become the nerve center for jazz. Today, this three-day festival draws over 40,000 people. Held at the Monterey County Fairgrounds, over 500 of today's best jazz acts perform on seven stages. (Beat that, Lollapalooza!) There are also other educational activities, such as workshops, exhibitions, clinics, panel discussions, and conversations with the artists. The person responsible for organizing this massive event is Tim Jackson. With preparations already underway for the 49th Festival this year, Tim took a quick break to chat about how he got to call the shots for the world's longest-running jazz festival.



BY VERONICA DOMINGUEZ-GARCIA

How did you become involved with the MJF?

I was studying jazz in college and playing some gigs. A person I knew suggested starting a nonprofit jazz society because there was no place for anybody to play. So with a couple of friends, we co-founded the Kuumbwa Jazz Center in Santa Cruz in 1975. We had no experience in organizational development or anything like that. We just learned as we went along. Then in 1990, I heard through the grapevine that the MJF was going to making a change and was looking for a different general manager. I knew somebody on the board of directors and sent that person a letter. Ultimately, I ended up interviewing and getting the job in April 1991. The experience I gained at Kuumbwa in programming, administration, and financial management is what gave me the experience for MJF.

What do you do for the festival?

I'm in charge of the operation of the staff here, and I oversee everything from the educational department to fund-raising. Primarily, I do all of the artistic programming. I report to my

board of directors as the administrator of the organization.

What type of talent is presented at MJF?

We have a lot of the current jazz stars [at the festival]. This year we had Tony Bennett, Pat Metheny, and Branford Marsalis. We also have lots of regional and emerging jazz artists. And we do some special projects, where we'll commission an artist—this year it was Carla Bley—to write and perform a new piece of music. We try to present a cross-section to keep the “festive” in festival.

Are there special issues related to running a jazz festival?

You have a certain responsibility to your audience to make sure they have a quality experience. We try to pay a lot of attention to the details, especially the sound quality, to make sure people are in a good situation listening to the music.

Which aspects of your position do you like and dislike?


I enjoy the artistic programming the most. Being a jazz flute player, it

keeps that connection to the artistic process there for me. Probably the aspect I like the least is the “people management” part. I have a very good staff, but it takes a lot of time and energy to keep people happy and feeling like they're contributing.

What are good qualities for a position like yours?

You have to have a love of music, in my case, jazz. You have to be willing to work very hard. You have to be consistent in your approach and have an overall vision as to where you want to go. But more than anything, you have to have a commitment to what you are doing, feeling that it has value and is important to you. I've been doing this for my whole adult life, really. So it's what I know, and I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Any advice for someone interested in working for a festival?

Most music festivals are nonprofit organizations and use volunteers. So, find a way to volunteer and start to learn that way. That's how you build your contacts. 

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