

International Jazz Festival is finally a go

Palm Springs event has been 60 years in making

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Police Chief Gus Kettmann was suspicious and he recommended against it. Mayor Frank Bogert was initially all in favor.

The Desert Sun pictured Bogert leaning over the back of a chair chatting with "entertainment impresario" Gene Norman in October 1958, "following the latest appeal to the City Council to hold a Jazz Festival in Palm Springs ... the mayor has discussed the possibility of holding the concert on several occasions in the past, and yesterday the plan for the three-day show was brought to light."

An article accompanied the photo. "Plans are being formulated today for a gigantic music festival to be held in Palm Springs...news of the planned event was released yesterday when Gene Norman, who has been behind the presentation of Musical Festivals throughout the state during the past nine years, appeared before the City Council to ask for the use of the polo grounds for three days."

There was a different type of music proposed for each day. And that's where the police chief drew the line. He was decidedly against that fast music that agitated the kids and the adults didn't understand.

The first day was to be Dixieland with Louis Armstrong. That was fine. Armstrong had come to play for adoring fans at the Chi Chi Club's Starlite Room and everybody happily went to see him. Armstrong had been welcomed in countries around the world and was dubbed the "Jazz Ambassador."

The second day would be devoted to swing with the great big bands like Count Basie's. That was just right; everyone listened to big band music on the radio, in theaters and concert halls



"Jazz Ambassador" Louis Armstrong plays his golden horn in 1962 at the Chi Chi in Palm Springs. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

across the country. Famous starlets married bandleaders. It was just plain glamorous.

But the last day was to be set aside for "jazz," played by virtuoso musicians experimenting with improvisation, and the chief was against it.

Norman pointed out that "he did not want the people to get excited about the term 'jazz music' explaining 'it is not rock and roll or fast music. America is recognized throughout the world for its jazz music, and many countries of the world copy and use American jazz. The music that is played at the Jazz Music Festivals throughout the state also appeals to older people from 35 years of age or older."

Norman tried to assure the council and the chief that the music would appeal to the older generation and was safe. But the chief was suspicious it was strictly for the onslaught of wild teenagers and would provoke "undue exuberance" which had already been in evidence each spring break.

Norman, presaging the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival years later, argued that festivals drew thousands of people from all the western states and "will act as tremendous promotion for the city of Palm Springs."

Neither the chief nor the council was convinced.

Even the Desert Sun Editorial Board weighed in: "The City Council acted



Frank Sinatra, from left, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr. rehearse for the United Fund Charity Kickoff show at the Riviera Hotel.

wisely, we think, the other evening when it voted to deny a permit for... a concert of modern music which could well be another name for a jazz festival. Music may have charms to soothe the savagery in man or beast, as the old saying goes, but it depends upon the music...(it) has been known to do just the opposite."

"The proposed programs for the entertainment of the vacationing adolescents are fine and they will appeal to the majority of the visitors who are normal youngsters. But these programs will be lost on the very element they are expected to curb, the segment of our visitors which does the damage and creates the disturbances. They are 'on the loose' after weeks of regimentation in the classroom and they are here to have fun--fun as they see it. They will not be diverted by any set program. They want to invent their own. A Jazz Festival might stimulate them..."

And so the notion of a jazz festival in 1958 was nixed. Jazz was thought subversive and scary, despite the Chi Chi regularly featuring swinging jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong, Nat "King" Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Pearl Bailey, Lena Horne and the rat pack stars like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis, Jr. without any trouble.

Sixty years later, 10-time Grammy winner and Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient, trumpeter Arturo Sando-



Armstrong performs in the Chi Chi's Starlite room in the mid-1950s.

val blows into town on Nov. 23 for the inaugural Palm Springs International Jazz Festival.

A world-renowned musician like Armstrong before him, Sandoval brings swing.

The rest of the program is just as impressive, with Stacey Kent and her band fresh off a gig at the Blue Note in Japan. Songstress Tierney Sutton, flying home from her nuptials in Paris to be here. And French chanteuse Rene Marie helps the festival live up to its international aspirations. They are backed by John Beasley's 18-piece big band.

This new jazz festival is reminiscent of other great ideas with humble beginnings like the Palm Springs International Film Festival and Modernism Week. Started by a few visionary locals, those offerings are now synonymous with the town itself and are embraced worldwide.

A jazz festival, an idea started decades ago, will finally come to fruition Nov. 23 and 24 at the Annenberg Theater, not far from where the Chi Chi Starlite Room once showcased jazz legends.

Tickets are available at palm Springs jazz.org