

World Music Day becomes unique Palo Alto tradition

Diverse musical groups provide entertainment on University Avenue

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On June 21 2009, the streets of downtown Palo Alto transformed into a cultural musical haven. This year, Palo Alto residents can once again experience that same diverse medley of musical talent.

On Sunday, June 20, University Avenue, King Plaza and surrounding streets will be filled with a variety of musicians performing in celebration of World Music Day.

Palo Alto High School parent Claude Ezran brought the tradition to Palo Alto last year after engaging in a similar event in London, England.

World Music Day is a world-wide festival that takes place around the Summer Solstice where musicians of all abilities perform concurrently on street corners, in parks and in front of stores for free.

The music festival began in France in 1982 and has since expanded to countries around the world. Last year, 8000 people congregated in the downtown Palo Alto area to listen to a wide variety of musical genres ranging from the standard jazz, blues, pop and rock to the less common genres of Celtic, Klezmer and Chinese.

"Given the success of World Music Day last year and the very positive publicity it received, we expect even more spectators this year," Ezran said.

The event will be similar to last year's festival, though it will last longer. It will take place from 3:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. and will have three periods instead of two, each time period is an hour-and-a-half. New musical groups will be substituted in after each time period ends.

"The change is based on feedback we received last year when we surveyed the public," Ezran said. "Many people wanted a longer lasting event so they could see more. A longer event also gives more musicians an opportunity to participate in the festival."

Many bands that played in the festival last year will return again this year. So far, 24 of the 42 groups that performed last year are coming back.

"That more than 50 percent of the musicians are returning is a testament to the fact that musicians really enjoyed playing at World Music Day last year, even though they are not compensated," Ezran said. "They liked the festive ambiance, playing outdoors and most of all, the concept behind World Music Day, a celebration of music in all of its forms, that takes place around the world during the Summer Solstice, the longest day of the year."

Returning bands include the World Harmony Chorus, Hot Kugel, who play Yiddish Jazz music, the BuffaloChips, who play Acoustics Roots music, Born to Drone, who perform Baltic music and Les Campagnards.

Les Campagnards thoroughly enjoyed the celebration and even played past the official end of the event last year because their old French folk style drew in the crowds. They will play for two time periods this year due to their incredible success at last year's event.

Alan Keith, one member of Les Campagnards, enjoyed the outdoor, interactive experience of World Music Day.

"Our group was large enough so that we could both play the music and demonstrate and teach some of the dances to the public which was a big hit," Keith said.

The production of World Music Day will no longer be a one-man show, as Ezran has joined forces with the Palo Alto Recreation Foundation.

The detailed planning of the festival started just after April 4, when City Council voted to make World Music Day an annual festival in Palo Alto. The city will waive permit fees and pay for the Palo Alto Police Department to monitor the event.

"To have a successful event, we need three essential components: musicians, volunteers for the day of the event and spectators," Ezran said. "Organizing such a large festival requires a lot of work. It takes time to communicate with the musicians, get all the necessary information from them and then place them in specific spots where they will play their music."

Ezran strategically places the different musical groups to optimize sound quality.



COURTESY OF CLAUDE EZRAN

Spectators watch a cellist perform at the first ever Palo Alto World Music Day last year. This year a variety of musical genres such as Klezmer and Chinese will again be represented at the festival taking place on June 20

"I try to make sure that louder groups are not placed too close to groups that play acoustically," Ezran said.

The unique format of the festival proves to be a very enjoyable experience for all participants.

"When you stroll on University Avenue and encounter unexpected bands and a wide variety of musical genres, something for each and every taste, this is markedly different from the more usual and less surprising experience of buying a ticket to go to an indoors concert," Ezran said. "Another highlight was the fact that people enjoyed walking down the streets and randomly coming across many friends,

neighbors and acquaintances. There are not that many opportunities in our modern life to experience that type of feeling."

Keith also believes that the unique event fosters a different environment and an exciting and interactive way to learn about other cultures.

"With the World Music Day setting, many of the folks who travel up and down University Avenue and to the other city locations will have new and unexpected discoveries and experiences," Keith said. "[Les Campagnards'] music, instrumentation and dances are little-known outside of the traditional folk scenes and venues of France, so it is encountered with

more than a bit of surprise by the American public. We spend a good amount of time answering questions."

Ezran enjoys organizing this exotic event because he feels that such a day is beneficial to the community.

"I am happy to make people happy," Ezran said. "I have developed many friendships with musicians and find it culturally enriching to be around artists. As a member of the Palo Alto Human Relations Commission, I also feel that World Music Day helps us fulfill one of our objectives to strengthen our community."

To learn more about World Music Day, visit pamusicday.org.