

# Is This Jazz?: An Incomplete Guide To The 2016 Newport Jazz Festival

Anybody who has had the good fortune to attend the Newport Jazz Festival knows it can be a bit overwhelming. Large crowds swarming the grounds, a staggering number of killer musicians, and a cacophony of marvelous sound emanating from every corner of the festival presents a sensory overload to the uninitiated.

My first few years as part of this landmark event, I worked at one of the vendor carts lining the walkway on the outskirts of the Fort Stage. Although I was on the clock, from my vantage point I was blessed to see some amazingly dynamic performances that have remained permanently seared into my eardrums. A couple years ago I finally took in the festival as a true, ticket-purchasing audience member. It rained buckets on the first day, but I didn't care. I just stood in the downpour listening to the Mingus Big Band blast through some of the most genius music ever created. Frozen bones and soaked clothes were no match for the raucous renditions of the best of the Mingus oeuvre.

I know how intoxicating the Newport Jazz Festival can be, and how equally maddening it is trying to hit every act on your list. Trust me, as hard as you try, you will undoubtedly miss something that everyone will be talking about for years to come — I still kick myself for leaving Terrance Blanchard's electrifying set for another musician I ultimately found a bit less personally inspiring — but you will assuredly encounter moments and music that will stay with you longer than any regrets ever will. However, we need to make sure you are at least a little prepared, so even though this is a very short (and thereby terribly incomplete) primer, here are some of the sets I am dying to see at this year's Newport Jazz Festival.

Friday is a cornucopia of masterful saxophonists. From legends like Jimmy Heath and Steve Coleman to young lions like Kamasi Washington and Ben Wendell (Kneebody) and rounded out with Donny McCaslin and Ken Vandermark (Eric Revis Parallax), you will find many who have reshaped paths for the instrument and represent all facets of the saxophone's supremacy. While I'm sure these sax sets will be equally great, after seeing Kamasi Washington's band, *The Next Step*, in Boston and hearing his presence on a few different masterful releases this past year —including his own *The Epic* — this group's spiritual grace and ferociously intense groove is a must-see.

For those devastated by the loss of David Bowie, take solace in knowing that you can witness the other half of the genius that was his final album by checking out his collaborators in the Donny McCaslin Group. Made up of some of the most mind melting, adventurous players in the business, these four mold sounds and music in a whirlwind that is far beyond description.

Saturday takes Friday's excellence and cranks it up. If you're looking for artists at the absolute peak of the mountain, then ready yourself for the titanic Chick Corea Trilogy with Christian McBride and Brian Blade. All three musicians represent the pinnacle of ability and expression on their instruments and together create motion not readily achievable by mere mortals. Brian Blade recently recorded at the Columbus Theatre with his group The Fellowship Band, so he definitely deserves some Rhody love for that.

Although jazz rarely allows for prodigies, piano phenom Joey Alexander is the exception. Performing at the 2015 festival at only 11 years old, Alexander returns in 2016 with his trio to inspire awe with a virtuosic prowess and connection to the music that escapes some musicians thrice his age.

If you crave the feel and flair found only in New Orleans, look no further than Butler, Bernstein, & The Hot 9. While not previously acquainted with their work, I came across this group by scouring the schedule and (having always had a big spot in my heart for jazz's earliest sounds) couldn't stop listening to every piece I could find. Authentic, soulful and rich music.

Sunday is always bittersweet, but the finale is as explosive a day as any. After being mesmerized by their duo album *Hagar's Song*, I have craved the chance to see saxophonist Charles Lloyd and pianist Jason Moran perform together live, and my prayers have been answered with the Charles Lloyd New Quartet. Complete with bassist Reuben Rogers and drummer Eric Harland, it's difficult to find words that can accurately represent the depth of their sonic capabilities, so in lieu of a description I will simply deem this set as required listening for all.

Also on the required list are Christian Scott Atunde Adjuah presents Stretch Music. I've listened to a few different records that feature Scott and have yet to pin down just what makes his music so captivating. Defiant of genre, you will hear all phases of his experience and eras of influence within this one set.

As Sunday is your last chance for an entire year to see this much spectacular music in one place, I suggest hopping around as much as you can. From the Latin rhythms of the Yosvany Terry Quintet to the neo-soul tinged grooves of the Robert Glasper Experiment, from the jaw dropping collaboration of Potter, Holland, Loueke, and Harland to the genius of Ben Williams & Sound Effect playing a special piece commissioned by the George Wein/Doris Duke Artistic Programming Fund, you absolutely cannot go wrong with any stage.

I called this an incomplete guide because there are so many incredible, life-defining artists and sets on this year's schedule that it simply defies completion. Head over to [newportjazzfest.org](http://newportjazzfest.org) for more information, artist bios and links to music so you can catch a glimpse of what's in store. Have fun at the Newport Jazz Festival, travel safely on your journey, and be sure to let me know about your experience and your favorite sets. See you there!

#### Happening Around Town:

**The John Allmark Jazz Orchestra;** *Mondays @ The Met (Pawtucket)*

**Is This Jazz?;** *first Friday, bimonthly @ AS220 (Providence) [isthisjazz.tumblr.com](http://isthisjazz.tumblr.com)*

**Joe Potenza;** *Fridays @ Tarragon Bar (Providence)*

**Groove Merchants;** *Mondays @ Fifth Element (Newport)*

**Jazz Jam;** *Tuesdays @ Ten Rocks (Pawtucket)*

**The Jazz Series;** *Mondays @ Fete (Providence)*

**Parlour Jazz Jam;** *third Sunday each month @ The Parlour (Providence)*

**Matunuck Beach Hot Jazz Party;** *Mondays @ The Ocean Mist (Matunuck)*

**Phrase Collective;** *Thursdays @ Mangos (Pawtucket)*

**Jazz Revelations;** *“Baba Yaga” July 23rd@ Firehouse 13, “Natraj” July 24th @ Aurora*

To add your listing please email [isthisjazzri@gmail.com](mailto:isthisjazzri@gmail.com).

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