

A Musical Summer in Newport

The musical culture of Newport has attracted tourists from all over the world for decades. The Folk and Jazz festivals at Fort Adams State Park along with the Yachting Center's Celtic Rock Festival, Reggae Festival, Summer Comedy Series and Summer Concert Series have been favorites of Newport's tourists and locals alike. The City by the Sea has never been boring for music lovers. However, following years of fun, music and food, the public lost the Yachting Center. In 2014, the Newport Harbor Corporation sold the land to invest further in their ever-expanding restaurant and hotel operations, according to WPRI Eyewitness News. Walking down America's Cup Avenue at night is now, by comparison, a practically silent venture.

After expressing this grievance to Steve Lepre, he quickly pointed out that Newport's music scene has never been boring, regardless of the time of year. As I walked down the street in the rain with the promoter and sound engineer of Jimmy's Saloon, we discussed the current state of things. Steve argued that tourists don't have to limit their visits to Newport to only once or twice a year in order to hear great music. "You have to remember that Newport pubs didn't just start hosting live bands after the Yachting Center closed. This has been going on since the 1970s." Bob Dylan's revolutionary electric performance in 1965, the Newport ska punk scene, Big World and Throwing Muses are just a few things that came to mind. "Tourists don't have to go to Fort Adams or another big venue to see a national act. Awesome bands play more often than you think, if you know where to go."

Leading the resurgence of live music in Newport, Jimmy's Saloon has actively participated as both a host and an educator. In 2015, Jimmy's partnered with Collective Thought Media and launched "Straight from the Stage," a series of interviews exploring the history, influence and goals of Newport's musical community. Sid Abruzzi of the punk band Big World shares stories about the national acts that have come through Newport over the years. Led Zeppelin, Jethro Tull, Twisted Sister, the Ramones, The Dictators and the New York Dolls have done sets at the Hotel Viking, the Newport Hotel (formerly the Electric Elephant), Festival Field and other, smaller venues. Many of the musicians interviewed reminisced about their favorite events and spots in Newport, all highlighting live music's communal effect. Lead singer Craig Ferris of We Own Land sums it up when he says, "Live, local music is basically the heartbeat of any town."

Over the last five years in particular, Jimmy's Saloon has carried the torch for live, local entertainment. Not only do they host national acts like The Silks, The Viennagram, Sibinnac and Anklepants, but they also have a constant rotation of local bands. Jimmy's does not discriminate against genres; IONEYE (Steve's solo project), Chronovore, Oak Lonetree, Hellbound and the Cannibal Ramblers have all taken to the stage here and have yet to disappoint. Encouraging all musicians to perform, Jimmy's also hosts an open mic night on Thursdays called Ocean Mic. Like all open mics, it is a fantastic opportunity for local artists to meet and jam with other musicians; but what sets Ocean Mic apart is its patronage and participation. I've been to other open mics where the house band just plays the whole time and there's a handful of people at the bar. At Jimmy's, they like to keep the line-up diverse and rotating; and, according to Mr. Lepre, sometimes the musicians, comedians and freestylers you see at Ocean Mic can really surprise you, and they might even give your Friday-Saturday headliners competition!

Along with Jimmy's, other venues have been taking up the call for live entertainment. The Parlor Kitchen & Bar on Broadway hosts an open mic on Wednesdays and is a frequent venue for bands like

the Ravers, Whisky Fyre and Folsom, the Johnny Cash Tribute. Buskers, Midtown Oyster Bar, Hotel Viking, Noreys, the Wharf Pub and Pour Judgment have many acoustic solo acts come in on weekends and weekdays alike, including Sean Rivers and Betsy Listenfelt. If live jazz is your thing, head over to the Fifth Element on either Sunday or Monday night to catch acts like the Groove Merchants, and be sure to visit Sardella's Italian Restaurant on Wednesdays. The Fastnet Pub even has a live traditional Irish session every Sunday night and a live blues band every Monday. As Steve said, you will never run out of options or have an empty day of the week, if you know where to go.

Since the 1970s, Newport has been a hub for creativity, comedy, great shows and festivals, and original music. The city is looked upon amicably by locals and touring musicians alike as a place with great energy and patronage. Unfortunately, many also view the entertainment scene as part of Newport's bygone days before it became about the mansions, beaches and restaurants; however, people like Steve Lepre want to tell both travelers and locals that it's far from being a thing of the past. Live, original music is alive and well, and venues like Jimmy's and the Parlor are there to make sure it is here to stay.