

# The Biggest Festival in the Smallest Town: The Collaborative Presents the 5th annual Warren Folks Festival

When The Collaborative's executive director Uriah Donnelly talks about the upcoming Warren Folks Festival happening August 28, his excitement and love of all things art shines through. He, along with a small but mighty team, have put together a festival that is counting down the days to burst onto the streets of Warren. If you're looking for a local summer event where you'll see people you've been missing for a year or longer, hear music that you love, and eat and drink until you can't anymore, well, dear reader, you've found your event.

**Mayté Antelo-Ovando (Motif):** Why don't you start by telling me what this event is all about?

**Uriah Donnelly:** It's a fundraising event for the nonprofit, The Collaborative that I'm the director and founder [of]. We launched the nonprofit in 2016, but that year we had no plans to do anything like this [event]. We actually were going to just have a pig roast and some beer [to celebrate] a couple of folks in town who happen to have the same birthday. And then it turned into a full-fledged party-like festival that day!

**MA-O:** Oh, wow!

**UD:** We ran out of food, we ran out of beer, we just like ran out of everything. But it was a whole lot of fun. And people we're talking about it a lot. And it did help raise some funds for our organization. So we were like, well, we should just do that every year, you know? And so that's sort of what it evolved into. It's bigger every year, certainly.

*In reflecting on how the festival has grown, Donnelly mentioned a variety of partnerships and sponsors that have made the event possible over the years.*

**UD:** There's 30 Cutler, which is a mill building in town, [where] artists and makers rent out the spaces. It's pretty cool. We use the back lot of their venue to do this festival and our drive-in movie series that we started last year. So, they're a partner, because they don't charge us any rent to use the space. It's kind of a big in-kind donation, really. And then of course, Narragansett is our big sponsor for the festival. They're a partner in that they're our one and only beer vendor. When we started in the first couple of years, a bunch of different beer vendors would get together. And they all donate the beer. And then we don't sell it, they donate it to us. But after the second year of running out of beer, we thought we'd go to Narragansett and say, you know, if you all want to be the sponsor for this thing, we won't ask anybody else, but just make sure we don't run out of anymore beer. So they [became just that]... BJ and [and others are] really great partners with us. Every year, they'd come out and they'd bring the whole staff and you know, and it was just a great party. And so we continue that relationship. And again, the amount of beer that they donate is so massive that they're technically a partner in this more than a sponsor... we couldn't do it without them, honestly. We'd find a way but you know, we'd run out of beer again!

**MA-O:** And then where would you be? Haha.

**UD:** Oh, my gosh, [the festival] was always on a Sunday. This is the first year it'll be on a Saturday. We would have to call our friends, people we know who own package stores. And they would open for us because it would be after six o'clock. Right? They would open for us, they would go and like just grab a bunch of beer. Come back. And then the next day on Monday, I'd go and pay them for the beer that we took. It was a total mess.

**MA-O:** I love it. Of course, I love that as someone hearing the story. When you're the planner, though, that's not so much fun.

**UD:** Oh my gosh. Yeah. It was the biggest fear, right? You run out of beer, everybody leaves and then who knows what you lose!

**MA-O:** Exactly! Exactly! You couldn't hold the festival last year. How has that influenced what you are doing this year?

**UD:** In the first couple of years, nearly 75% of our income [came] from the Folks Festival. Now, we've grown a lot as an organization, so it's a little more balanced than that. We try not to rely too much on it, because anything can happen. Not having it last year, and then if say the PPP money that came in, and some other funding from RISCA [Rhode Island State Council on the Arts], and COVID-related funding that came for nonprofits hadn't happened for us, then we would be in pretty rough shape right now, financially. And particularly because the festival comes at the end of our year, we would have pretty much been, you know, shut down. All of our programs, our gallery on Main Street, the Festival wouldn't have happened. So we'd have very little to no income coming in, and then, you know, we wouldn't be able to get into this year, right? Because Folks Fest wouldn't be until now. So we would have really struggled to get to now without any of that help. We tried to do a bunch of different things to fill the gap. Like I said, we started the drive-in movie series. It doesn't make a lot of money, but it helps us a little bit along the way. And it's something for people to do, particularly last year when people couldn't do anything. We got a little FM transmitter and it goes right into your car, so you didn't have to get out or talk to anybody or anything.

**MA-O:** How did I not know about this? I wish I'd known about this last year!

**UD:** I don't know, you gotta follow us! So, we're doing it again this year. We have films leading up to the Folks Fest. We [also sought] other grant help and reached out to our community. We're doing a really big holiday appeal at the end of the year where we ask all of our folks for money. We had to pull on all those heartstrings. I know everybody's struggling, right? But we got hit pretty, pretty big for us, you know?

**MA-O:** Yeah, it's a massive impact for everyone. Especially anything arts related. I think it just was gutted so much...

**UD:** Yeah, particularly if you're program- and event-based, right? I mean, you get grants, but they're based on the programs that you're supposed to be able to run and you can't do it. And the arts are important. I wouldn't be doing this [otherwise], but I know during the pandemic there were way more important causes. You know, I mean, gosh, so much happened last year.

**MA-O:** It's really great to know that these events are happening and that suddenly we're making plans again, and now we have something to look forward to.

**UD:** Yeah, yeah. So, you know, we're hoping and counting on a big one this year. You know, we're ready. We're certainly ready for it.

**MA-O:** If you were describing Folks Fest to someone who just moved to Rhode Island, what would you say?

**UD:** Oh, man, you gotta come to Folks Fest! It's the greatest-biggest party all year and it's free! It's free to come in, it's just everything local, you know, almost all the musicians are from Rhode Island. And we do have a visitor from New York coming in, for the first time. All the restaurants and food people are all Rhode Island, if not particularly Warren-based. So, if you want to get a great taste of what Rhode Island's like and what Warren has to offer, then then this is the festival to come to. I'll go through the pictures in previous years, and it's like, every single person is smiling. And, and there's so much to do. I didn't even mention the artists yet. There's over 40 art vendors and they're all super local. You're seeing makers and artists that are working and living here. Just like a really great community gathering.

**MA-O:** When I think of Warren, what it speaks to, for me is just art. I feel like all I see when I walk around, whether it's a festival or a walkabout or just a day around Warren- is art galleries everywhere, restaurants, music- so to me it seems like the Warren Folks Festival is just another way to showcase- like you said, what Warren has to offer.

**UD:** Yeah, I think so. While it is very small, they do champion that it's the smallest town in the smallest county in the smallest state- you have to have all three...

**MA-O:** Oh! Is it? I didn't know that.

**UD:** It's not the smallest town, but it is the smallest town that happens to be in the smallest county that happens to be in the smallest state. You have to have all three to make it true right? Anyway, there [are] other sides to [Warren], than what you might see coming down Main Street. I do think that the Folks Fest and the Warren Walkabout, which is the staple event in October, give you a sense of what drives the economy here. It certainly hasn't always been that way. I think within the last five or six years it's become what you see now. You know, it used to be just antique shops everywhere and no art, and hardly any art galleries, a couple of studios here or there. But certainly, the restaurants have helped out a lot. I think Warren is in some ways a food Mecca. It's got a little bit of everything ... and some really great talented chefs and restauranteurs thinking outside the box, which is great. You know, I obviously talk a lot and I talked to a lot of different people. And one of the things that I'm really proud of the town of Warren going through the pandemic is that none of our restaurants or shops or anything had to close, they all sort of made it through. A couple places changed hands, but it wasn't pandemic-related. And so everybody found a way to get through or found the help that they needed, or the community here; and I know they got together and like made a point to go out and get gift cards and go to eat at the restaurants and do things when they could. That's kind of what the town's about: everybody supporting each other and making sure everybody's doing all right.

**MA-O:** Yeah, that's a huge testament to the community that you all have built, or the community that is there simply. Do you wanna say a little bit more about who is performing? And you mentioned that there's somebody coming from New York?

**UD:** So, I have a couple other folks who do the booking. One of them is a founder, and the other one is a musician in town. And I get a lot of help with that. But it's a good mix, I think, of different styles of

music. One of the things that we try to do, we're not very successful at it, as much as I'd like, is to add a lot of diversity to our lineup. We asked a lot of people to play and some folks are outside of our budget. We get responses for pretty high numbers for bands that we think would be fun for the event, you know, because it's also a party atmosphere, it's outdoors, you have to be a little bit loud. I think this year, particularly the styles of music are very different than we've had in the past.

Here's the lineup [on the Main Stage]: Sharks Come Cruising — they sing sea shanties. It's full instrumental, but there's a lot of like, shouting together, and it's a good time. The Copacetics are like a ska punk kind of band. The Brian James SoulJazz quartet is just that — it's soul jazz. It's all instrumental. The Waterbearer, Joe, is a rapper, but he's gonna come with a live band. And so it's going to be cool and a lot of fun. And Dida is coming up from New York City with a band, and it's sort of soul jazz as well. But she has a really great, organic style to it. And she sings as well. And then the Z-Boys are playing!

**MA-O:** That's awesome!

**UD:** Yeah, from Newport. We're excited about them, too, because they're just super high energy, you know. If you're at this festival, and maybe you're 100 yards away, and at the art festival or the food area, and it's you know, it's just rockin. So [the Z-Boys] are gonna add a nice thing to it. And we have PVDlive [too]. They do a lot of booking of shows. We had a second stage the last couple of years, and we wanted to do it again. But you know, it becomes a little too much to manage, [so it's] nice to get somebody else [to help]. What Chrissy Stewart does with PVDlive is bringing a lot of different voices together. And it's folks that we don't have connections with yet, you know, so that's important for us. And so, she's bringing five Rhode Island-based singer songwriters: John Faraone, Lauren King, Brooxana, Will Orchard and Brown Bones.

**MA-O:** I've only lived in Providence for three years, but I've been very lucky to be in the right places at the right time. So, a lot of the people that you're mentioning I know as friends or as performers. It's just nice to see how everything just interweaves the way that it does in Providence, I feel like that's such a Providence and Rhode Island thing.

**UD:** Yeah, it certainly is. And, you know, I'm mostly from Providence. So I know how that all works. I was part of the music scene back in the '90s when I was younger and playing and it's always been like that. And for us over here, you know, you've probably heard this, that Rhode Island is so small but people still think it's so big that folks in Warren or the East Bay don't go to Providence and folks in Providence don't come over here. We work really hard to make connections with people from outside so we can get a collaborative, you know, and all the things that we're doing out to a wider audience. Working with PVDlive is important for us for that angle as well. And just bringing in great music, you can't argue with that.

**MA-O:** Can you tell me just a little bit about The Collaborative?

**UD:** Yeah, sure. We're an arts education-based nonprofit that started in 2016. We function really, you know, out of a very small space on Main Street that is just an art gallery. But over the years, we've used that space to its capacity. We've had live music in there, spoken word nights, obviously art shows, gallery openings and things like that; we've also done workshops and classes in there. So it [is] everything, from just having a gallery, to education opportunities, music performances — large like Folks Fest and small like intimate in the gallery, and sort of everything in between. We try not to say no to any cool or bad ideas. If folks are creative, and they have something they want to show people, then

we want to be the venue that does it. The gallery itself is not juried. It's not censored. We may be selective if we don't think it'll work in the gallery and people aren't gonna be interested in it for whatever reason, or if it doesn't go along with what we want to have as far as aesthetics, but we certainly don't pick people's art or select them to be there. Pretty much if folks sign up on the website. And we're going to do a call for artists pretty soon.

**MA-O:** Oh, that's good to know.

**UD:** We've had some movement, you know, some artists leave and some artists get pregnant, and have to take a little hiatus. And so we have some space coming up. Particularly into the fall and the holiday season, which is pretty busy for us. You just go onto our website and go to the membership page and sign up and you're on the list. We don't say no to people. You want to do this? Great, we have the space, let's do something. And if you're working on something new, or you have a cool project, or like a multimedia thing, or something really strange that you're not sure would work, try it. We'll be the space for you to try it. And if nobody likes it, nobody likes it, right? We like to think of continuing that mantra of educating people in the arts, but also educating artists on how to be artists and to be small businesses. We're not that, you know, hoity toity gallery that's really elitist and tough to get in. We want to be in that middle ground. You're starting out or you're working on something really cool? How can we help you?

**MA-O:** That's great. I feel like you just said your mission. Is that kind of what it states?

**UD:** Something like that. We're in the middle of a strategic plan and we are about to change [our mission]. But it does revolve around creating opportunities for artists and creative people, allowing them to grow and become the artists that they can be. We try to find different ways to help them do that. And to us art is everything. It's not just one thing. Everybody has artistic ability, whether they know or not, and, and everything to us is art.

**MA-O:** I love that. What's the thing that you're looking forward to the most for the festival?

**UD:** I mean, just doing it. We're just so eager to get out and do it this year. It's just a really great day, I can't express that in any other words, it's just so much fun. We're hoping, you know, people come out and enjoy all this cool stuff. I'll certainly be remiss if I don't mention our sponsors, because they're important to us. You know, we have obviously Narragansett and 30 Cutler, but also Navigant Credit Union, Bank Newport — they've been sponsors of the Folks Fest since the second year. And then our local plant and giftshop the Greenery is sponsoring us this year. We also have a sponsorship from Fox Pest Control, they reached out to us so we know that at least our buildings will be clean and free of bugs. And we also are sponsored by a Legislative Grant that we get through the House of Representatives, co-sponsored by Rep. Jason Knight and Rep. June Speakman. We're lucky enough to get funding through that for Folks Fest.

You asked what's the one thing [I'm looking forward to] and there's not just one. The food's gonna be out of sight and the music is going to be dynamite, the beer flow is going to be there, there's wine from Anchor and Hope, there's non-alcohol options from Granny Squibb's. [There will be] cookies and ice cream and you name it, there's gonna be something for everybody there.

**MA-O:** That's wonderful. And how does it feel doing all of this after a year off?

**UD:** It's exciting. We're really eager to do it. And really, really hopeful that it goes off [well]. Our only

barrier now is the weather and that's it, you know, but everything else is in place. And so as long as the weather cooperates, which, it always has ... in some ways, we might be due for bad weather, we try to miss the rain the best we can.

**MA-O:** Anything else you want to share or highlight?

**UD:** There's stuff for kids to do, too. This year there's an organization in town called Makers, and [they] teach littles — I think 5 and under — and they do amazing art and craft projects. There's gonna be a live photo booth so you can get your picture taken. I keep remembering all this other stuff that we're bringing. I'm sure there's other things, but you just have to come and check it out.

**MA-O:** That's right. I mean, the only way to know is to be there, right? That's the best way just experience it.

*The festival takes place in the backlot of 30 Cutler Street in Warren, rain or shine (from 1pm to 8pm on August 28<sup>th</sup>). Entry is free but donations are encouraged. Attendees are encouraged to walk or bike in as parking is very limited. Changes made to provide the safest festival for all: More space between vendors, more space in the food and drink area, high top tables to allow for distancing, and hand sanitizer will be available as well. For info, go to [www.thecollaborative02885.org](http://www.thecollaborative02885.org).*