

Gathering of The Vibes Pays Homage to Jerry Garcia

By BILL CLIFFORD, Special to The Courant

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The Gathering of the Vibes music festival returned to Bridgeport's Seaside Park last weekend, drawing more than 20,000 fans. The festival celebrates the birth and life of the late Jerry Garcia, (Aug. 1, 1942 – Aug. 9, 1995), famed guitarist/vocalist of the iconic band The Grateful Dead. Early arrivals (approximately 10,000) on Thursday were treated to a stellar performance from Dark Star Orchestra, which performed a song-by-song recreation of a Grateful Dead show originally performed on Oct. 17th, 1982, in New Mexico.

A new musical discovery on Thursday was Turbine, whose high-energy rock drew a large crowd to the smaller Green Vibes stage. Acoustic guitarist Ryan Rightmire also played the electric harmonica through effects pedals to create the sound of a Hammond Organ and later the sound of a DJ scratching records on a turntable.

Hartford-based pop rockers Bronze Radio Return got the festival off on a rousing note early Thursday afternoon with an upbeat, sweet set of music that featured the salty dog vocals of Chris Henderson.

Furthur features original band members Bob Weir and Phil Lesh of The Grateful Dead. They began Friday fittingly with "The Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion)," which begins with the lovely lyrics: "See that girl barefooting along/Whistling and singing, she's a carrying on." Drawing the largest crowd the festival has seen over the last four years, it's fair to say many were "barefooting along" in the park. Guitarist Weir was in warm, healthy spirits on this night, and added steel guitar to "Friend of the Devil," giving it a lovely country flair. Furthur paid loving tribute to the late Garcia on mellow odes such as "Althea," "Warf Rat" and "He's Gone," sung in fine voice by guitarist John Kadlecik. They encoored with the rarely played, complete "Terrapin Station," a psychedelic suite that highlights the superlative songwriting of Garcia and lyricist Robert Hunter.

Sacred Steel Guitar maestro Robert Randolph & The Family Band played a scorching set of blues-rock and southern hymnals infused with gospel vocalists, while Sharon Jones & the Dap Kings brought funky, Memphis soul to the northeast. Jackie Greene brought a west coast vibe of sunshine pop to the east with a soulful set of pop rock. His "A Moment of Temporary Color" was highlighted by the lyrics, "The purpose of my mission was to see the ocean. I have not seen the ocean." And while the ocean lyricist Tim Bluhm of the west coast rock band The Mother Hips refers to is the Pacific, when Greene sang the line, the irony of him playing with the Long Island Sound behind him wasn't lost.

New musical discoveries on Friday included New Haven based Kung Fu, an improvisational rock quartet and Fairfield's Caravan of Theives, a sweet and fun gypsy quartet of string musicians.

On Saturday, one could listen to the improvisational music of the Connecticut based teen trio The McLovins or groove along with Max Creek, a New England mainstay that has been performing together for nearly forty years.

The original line-up of Primus reformed this summer for a tour and was the headlining act on Saturday night. Their hard-hitting, thundering set drew a large, youthful crowd to the park on Saturday night. The Rhythm Devils is drummer Bill Kreutzmann and percussionist Mickey Hart of the Grateful Dead. Their set Saturday featured the sanguine vocals of Keller Williams on Dead songs such as "Uncle John's Band." The closed the set bringing out 2 fire dancers who leaped around with a polyrhythmic percussive beat behind them.

Sunday's highlights included a sweet but far too short set from festival regular the Ryan Montbleau Band, which also doubled as the backing band for solo troubadour Martin Sexton. Montbleau's music focused on heartfelt, emotional songwriting, while Sexton's set was a filled with gospel hymns and spirituals.

Reggae legend Jimmy Cliff performed stellar hits such as "Many Rivers to Cross" and "You Can Get It If You Really Want It" to a large, adult crowd, while Hip Hop pioneer Nas joined forces with Damian Marley.