

Newport Folk Festival offers considerable exposure for up-and-coming artists on folk's largest stage

Summer weekends in Newport often mean throngs of tourists visiting the town's historic waterfront attractions. However, one weekend in particular draws thousands of like-minded music lovers to Fort Adams for the annual Newport Folk Festival.

Typical New England weather couldn't keep people away. From hot, sunny and muggy to cloudy, windy and cool, every stage across the sprawling festival grounds was jam packed whenever a new artist took the stage.



Celebrating its 58th year in the nation's smallest state, the three-day festival featured main-stage headliners such as The Head and the Heart, Fleet Foxes, the Avett Brothers, Wilco and

John Prine as well as dozens of other performers. Also as usual, there were plenty of big-name surprises like Nathaniel Rateliff performing a secret solo set and Pink Floyd's Roger Waters sharing the stage with Prine.

However, it wasn't all about the headliners. Newport Folk is as much about the music as it is about the experience.

"In the 80's and 90's, a lot of the biggest names (playing) here, you could see somewhere else without the (traffic) challenges of coming down here," said Rick Massimo, former festival correspondent for The Providence Journal and author of [*I Got a Song: A History of the Newport Folk Festival*](#), the first full-length account of the festival's colorful history. "It's important the festival is a cohesive environment, otherwise people can see artists they like somewhere else."



Four stages are spread across the fort grounds, all featuring a wide variety of musicians and storytellers. One of the best things about the festival is the amount of support crowds offer to rising musicians that are taking the stage for their first taste of Newport Folk Fest. After playing their sets,

you'll often see people asking band members where they can find their music and when they can see them perform again.

As I walked through the crowd with London singer-songwriter [L.A. Salami](#), we couldn't go farther than 20 feet before he was stopped by somebody thanking him for his music or praising him for his unique fusion of folk, blues, pop and hip-hop. One new fan even stopped him to give him a necklace he appeared to purchase from the festival merch table.

Before only recently picking up a guitar, Salami previously wrote poetry. Now he's able to put melodies and distorted guitar riffs behind that clearly won over new fans from the crowd surrounding the Harbor Stage. He told me his unique sound doesn't so much come from one place or another, but really lies with the message that's being told.



"Certain moods are best said in certain ways, best translated in certain ways," he said. "If you have to translate how much someone broke your heart, maybe you use some tongue-in-cheek. Maybe you choose some type of soul avenue to express that and use your own process."

This sentiment of breaking down labels of music resonated with multiple artists I spoke to during the weekend.

“I think that folk, by definition, is people making due with what they have,” said A.J. Haynes, lead singer of Shreveport, Louisiana’s [Seratones](#). “Genres are kind of confusing and don’t capture what a sound is or what an ethos is.”

She said inspiration for her and the band comes from experience and emotion.

“It depends on the day of the week and the mood. I feel like we’re just rock and roll. What I like about (our record label) Fat Possum is that I think they’re more like an anti-blues and I think that’s what resonates with us. I don’t really have the blues, I’m too angry to have the blues.”



The exposure for smaller artists is part of what makes Newport such an amazing springboard for musicians breaking onto the scene.

As [Mt. Joy](#) guitarist and co-founder Sam Cooper put it, “It’s

kind of dependent on the audience. Specifically, here the audience is so respectful and willing to listen to music and clap after the song and really just dive into the song. I felt like we played an amazing show. Coming off the stage, I felt like the audience appreciated what we were doing.”

Mt. Joy is a band from Philadelphia currently recording their first full-length album embarking on their first real festival circuit.

Another great thing about the festival is artists getting to mingle and collaborate with fellow musicians. One prime example of this came on a cool Saturday afternoon as [JP Harris](#) and [Chance McCoy](#) shared the stage for some old-timey southern jams on acoustic guitars, fiddles and banjos. Both artists hail from larger names (JP is front man of JP Harris & the Tough Choices, while Chance plays fiddle and a slew of other strings for Old Crow Medicine Show) but became friends years ago and continue to jam together. They even recorded an album together, but were unable to release it due to legal restrictions. To get around this, they actually pirated their own album and have to sell bootleg versions of it!

The big names are great and draw a lot of crowds to the festival, but the heart of the weekend is truly being around easy-going people and experiencing music you may already know by heart, or discovering a new favorite artist you may never have heard elsewhere.

All Photos By Josh Souza

