

AUG 29, 8:17 AM

What To Know About DC Jazz Festival, Back At Multiple Venues For Labor Day Weekend

Sriram Gopal



Local saxophonist Elijah Jamal Balbed performs at the 2021 DC Jazz Festival.

Josh Brown / DC Jazz Festival

The music world is slowly, but surely, making its way out of pandemic-related setbacks and closures, and nowhere is this comeback more evident than with the [DC Jazz Festival](#). From Aug. 31 to Sept. 4, area venues will feature some of the finest musicians in what has become a truly global art form.

“The jazz ‘tent’ for the DC Jazz Festival is really an international one now,” says DCJF Executive Director Sunny Sumter, referring to the program that Artistic Director Willard Jenkins assembled.

In addition to applying a broadened interpretation of “jazz” as a genre, festival organizers sought diversity in other ways, by ensuring more women get headlining opportunities than in the past and emerging artists get to share the spotlight with the masters.

“We’ve, in a very intentional way, made sure that when people see the jazz festival as a whole, they are looking at the entire breadth of what jazz is,” Sumter says.

The festival, now in its 18th year, was traditionally scheduled around Father’s Day but in 2021 made its permanent move to Labor Day weekend. Last year’s event served as the proof of concept with respect to the calendar shift; more than 38,000 people attended the festival despite the pandemic, Sumter says.



DC Jazz Festival is back in multiple locations around the District, including a marquis event at The Wharf.

The Wharf DC

“For Destination DC and Events DC, our stakeholders, they can wrap their arms around a huge event that has become a destination over Labor Day weekend,” Sumter explains. Destination DC is in charge of marketing Washington D.C. as a destination for events and tourism, and Events DC is the convention, sports and entertainment authority for the District of Columbia. Both serve as sponsors of the festival.

One of DCJF’s central tenets in prior years was ensuring that it held performances throughout the city. The pandemic brought that to a halt, but that is once again becoming a priority, Sumter says. While the main stages and shows take place in and around The Wharf, Jazz Festival concerts will also go on in Anacostia, U Street/Shaw, Takoma, at the Eaton Hotel downtown, and in other neighborhoods. The limiting factor preventing a wider takeover is that limited resources are keeping it to a five-day festival, as opposed to the 10-day festival that occurred in years past.

But getting back to a 10-day festival is a goal for Sumter and her team. To that end, DCJF engaged former Kennedy Center president Michael Kaiser, who now chairs the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland. Kaiser will work with the festival’s board of directors to develop a strategic plan to return to a 10-day festival, perhaps as soon as 2023.

“For us, it’s about building back up the capacity to do a 10-day offering well,” Sumter says of the planning exercise.

So what should you get out to see? There's a full list of [shows available here](#), but below are some DCist is looking forward to at this year's DC Jazz Festival. While pandemic restrictions and proof-of-vaccination requirements are no longer in place, DCJF will have masks and sanitizers on hand at all events.

Who's kicking things off?

Previously, DCJF held its opening concerts at one of the many embassies that dot the city, and they were generally invite-only. Departing from that tradition, this year's opening night takes place Thursday, Sept. 1 at [The Howard Theatre](#). Celebrated vocalist Kurt Elling is the headliner. His style is understated, but far from being the Sinatra rip-off that inflicts many a male jazz singer. Local vocalist [Christie Dashiell](#) opens the show.

Tell me about DC Jazz Fest at The Wharf

The jazz festival's marquis event, two days of shows on the Saturday and Sunday of Labor Day weekend, include headlining ensembles under the direction of drummer [Cindy Blackman-Santana](#) and bassist Christian McBride. The Wharf's District and Transit Piers serve as the hubs for live music with performances, panel discussions, and film screenings at nearby venues. Other notable performers include legendary bassist [Ron Carter](#), The Marc Cary Trio, and The [Chuck Brown](#) Band.

Which local artists can I catch?

As usual, DCJF's organizers made it a point to elevate local artists during the festival. This year's program includes performances from vocalists [Lena Seikaly](#) and Heidi Martin, saxophonist [Elijah Balbed](#)'s JoGo Project, as well as trumpeter Donvonte McCoy.

I'm looking for something more low key. Where should I go?

DCJF often links up with a particular venue to serve as an intimate hub. In the past, it was the still-missed [Bohemian Caverns](#) or The Hamilton, but this year, Union Stage at The Wharf is playing that role. The club does not often feature jazz, but it is a great room for music and will no doubt serve its function well. Highlights from the lineup include percussionist Chien Chien Lu, area musicians Amy Shook (bass) and Aaron Myers (vocals), and the infectious grooves of Butcher Brown. Union Stage is also home the DC JazzPrix Finals, the annual international jazz band competition that DC Jazz Festival hosts.

The DC Jazz Festival takes place from August 31-September 4, 2022. Visit the [festival website](#) for full schedule and ticketing information.