

West Oak Lane – Mount Airy – Cheltenham
The Leader

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300,000 plus attend festival

For three days record number of visitors pack WOL Jazz/Arts

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Beautiful weather, superb live entertainment, and a diverse array of vendors combined to make the Fourth Annual West Oak Lane Jazz and Arts Festival a hit. More than 100,000 revelers converged along the Ogontz Avenue commercial corridor in the heart of West Oak Lane for the three-day event this past weekend. There they enjoyed dozens of local and national artists performing on four stages.

Tionna Richardson of Brooklyn, New York was among those who came in from out of town to attend last Sunday's festivities. She readily admitted that she originally came into the city to attend last week's N'COBRA conference, but word of mouth from fellow conventioners convinced her to venture into Northwest Philadelphia.

"I can't believe that there us something like this that is not downtown," said Richardson, who had purchased jewelry, artwork, and imported handbags from vendors. "In New York we have things like this, but usually in the more city parts of town. This is the first time I've ever seen anything like this in a nice residential neighborhood on the outskirts of a city. I like that. I think it brings a unique flavor to it."

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For recent high school graduate Quinetta Murray of Virginia Beach, Sunday's event took her back to the many times she has attended the Norfolk Jazz Festival held each summer. Murray was in town visiting her grandmother, Bernice Murray of West Oak Lane. She plans to return in the fall to become biology major at Temple University. She was dining at Ogontz Grill when she spoke to The Leader.

"This is very nice," said Murray. "The music is really ok. It reminds me of being back home with all the vendors and the music at the festival. Every summer I come to Philadelphia, but this is the first time I've been to this festival. I just think it's really nice."

Festival goers came out in droves from the first day of the festival. Ogontz Avenue homeowners even brought lawn chairs and sat on their upper floor balconies and a few even climbed out their window to get a rooftop view of the festivities.

Some attended the early morning breakfast featuring performer Leon Jordan at the Cornbread & Coffee shop located at 7175-D Ogontz Avenue. Many more filled West Oak Lane Senior Citizen' Center, 7210 Ogontz Avenue for the sounds of vocal divas Denise King, Sherry Butler, and Pearl Williams accompanied by the Budesu Brothers Trio.



The Leader / John Patillo

The 4th Annual West Oak Lane Jazz and Arts Festival was a huge success once again this year. Growing with each year the three day celebration of jazz music and artwork drew many locals as well as out of towners too. Unlike last year, not a single drop of rain intruded on the festivities.

There were estimates of well into the thousands when Mount Airy natives and recording artists Pieces of a Dream took the stage, located at Middleton and Ogontz Avenues, on Friday night. Perhaps no one was more excited about the thunderous applause than the group's manager Danny Harmon of Chestnut Hill.

“Piece of a Dream has been performing for 31 years,” said Harmon. “They are all in their mid 40’s now and they actually started playing in middle school. The response at the festival was really great. The group has traveled all over the world to many venues and festivals, and I would say that this is one of the best organized and better festivals that I’ve ever seen. There’s a lot of great energy here.”

The other Friday evening headliner that marveled the audience was Roy Ayers. In addition Free Expression performed at the Ogontz Grill, 7152 Ogontz Avenue, and the sounds of Roger Prieto were heard at Brownie's Par Four Lounge, 7173 Ogontz Avenue, until 1:30 a.m.

Saturday's jazz kicked off at Cornbread & Coffee with Jimi Odell. Other indoor entertainment took place at the national headquarters of Concerned Black Men, 7200 N. 21st Street with a drum workshop by Tony Wyatt. Singer Butler performed at the Art Noir Gallery, 7175-C Ogontz Avenue that evening, while Brownie's kept revelers along the avenue until 1 a.m. with a performance by Lucky Thompson.



The Leader / John Patillo

Throngs of jazz fans crowded Ogontz Avenue and filled the road and sidewalks to capacity to hear some of the big name acts that played this year's festival.

Yet, the greatest crowds were for headliners Pat Martino and recording artists WAR. The Ogontz and Middleton Stage also featured Abstract Truth, the Odean Pope Saxophone Choir, and Jeff Bradshaw's Brass Heaven. The Philadelphia Daily News Stage in the Ogontz Grill's parking lot had entertainment ranging from the West Oak Lane Senior Center's line dancers to Warren Oree & Arpaggio Jazz Ensemble and Kevin Mahogany. In addition Bootsie Barnes, Byard Lancaster, and Sun Ra Arkestra were among the other performers.

“I think there were about 100,000 people out here though I never heard the actual number,” said volunteer Butch Minnis about Saturday’s portion of the program. “The crowd was extremely large and there was clearly a greater interest in this festival than it ever was. The vendors all said the patronage of customers was wonderful. I (attribute) this to the expanded media campaign and the exceptional planning.”

Volunteer Adrienne Hackly of Mount Airy concurred. “This is my first time coming to the festival and it’s just fabulous,” she said as she was among those who manned the non-profit Ogontz Avenue Revitalization Corporation’s table. “I am sitting here greeting all the people. Everyone is just so excited. There are so many great people performing. This is just wonderful and I am truly happy to be here.”

The festival ended on a high note last Sunday. The local Kenny Gates Trio opened the live entertainment at Cornbread & Coffee from 9 a.m. to noon. Organist Kenny Gates, drummer Wayne Morgan, tenor saxophonist Donald Washington, and vocalist Art Jenkins marveled the breakfast diners with blues and jazz selections, including the music of Miles Davis.

Another crowd pleaser was the sounds of Cuba, Ghana, and Nigeria performed by the four-piece Woman’s Sekere Ensemble on the Ogontz Grill stage at 1 p.m. The Urban Guerilla Orchestra, a popular local group, held the crowd’s attention for nearly an hour before the platinum recording artist the Ohio Players culminated the festival until after dark.

Perhaps 13-year-old Jennifer Jones of Wilmington, Delaware summed up the festival best. She was in town visiting relatives in Cheltenham and Mount Airy when they brought her to the West Oak Lane Jazz and Arts Festival Sunday. “This is just awesome, awesome, awesome, and I can’t wait until next year,” she said.