

Taylor Ho Bynum (right) with young musicians at the Edgefest Parade.



COURTESY EDGEFEST



Ingrid Laubrock performs at Edgefest in 2015.

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Edgefest Now Bigger Than Ever

Ann Arbor's Edgefest will celebrate its 20th anniversary Oct. 26–29, quite a feat for a small festival that grew organically. Most events will take place at the 110-seat Kerrytown Concert House (KCH), which is located at the north end of the downtown area and was integral to getting the festival started.

In 1996, Dave Lynch, a copy editor, and two comrades, Damon Stanke and Jules Ryan, got tired of driving to Victoriaville, New York or Chicago to hear the music they loved: adventurous jazz. “In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ann Arbor earned a reputation for being edgy,” said Lynch, who is often considered as the founder of Edgefest but is quick to credit others as well. “But at the time, we were wondering where the cutting edge was.”

Their first stab at presenting music was to book alto saxophonist Tim Berne. From then, the word got out that Ann Arbor was a perfect landing spot for bands touring the Midwest. They needed a home and found a receptive ear in Deanna Relyea, founder and director of KCH, to launch the Jazz at the Edge series.

In the fall of 1997, the organizers faced a conundrum when three major bands expressed interest in playing Ann Arbor on the same day. Edgefest was born. From noon to 2 a.m., the city enjoyed a smorgasbord of concerts with baritone saxophonist Charlie Kohlhase, ROVA Saxophone Quartet and Dave Douglas' Tiny

Bell Trio. “Without Deanna, nothing would have happened,” Lynch explained. “She had the venue, the sponsors and the donors.”

Soon after, Lynch joined the KCH staff as festival artistic director, and the event progressively added more days. Following the 10th edition, he left to embrace a full-time copyediting career, and Relyea took over as she felt she had developed enough connections and a deep appreciation for the music. “I am a singer with a classical background, and when I started KCH we presented some jazz, but they were mainstream artists,” she said. “[Now] it's about supporting forward-looking music and musicians who take risks.” Under her leadership, the event added one extra day and a parade in 2007. “It is symbolic of what the festival is about: community and outreach,” she said. “It's fantastic to see kids from middle school playing Sun Ra with [trombonist] Steve Swell or [trumpeter] Wadada Leo Smith. It is also a bow to New Orleans and the marching band tradition.”

When one is asked about Edgefest, the two words that keep coming back are “community” and “family.” “It's a good place to play to the audience and to meet people,” said saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock, who first played Edgefest in 2013 with the LARK Quartet. “You get a rare opportunity to talk to other musicians, to the organizers and to the fans. There is a family component built in.” This year, she will lead her own project, Serpentes, featuring unusual

instrumentation (koto, tuba and electronics are in the mix) and a new compositional approach.

In addition to Laubrock, KCH will bring a stellar lineup to celebrate the anniversary in style. “This year is special: Every act could be the headliner,” Relyea said. The lineup includes trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith and bassist John Lindberg, Trio 3, bassist William Parker, drummer John Hollenbeck's Claudia Quintet, and pianists Kris Davis and Craig Taborn. Berne will be back performing with guitarist David Torn at Club Heidelberg, where it all started.

The festival was able to afford this thanks to new grants or “celebration money,” as the artistic director calls it. Relyea said, “The [Robert D.] Bielecki Foundation gave us a grant to work toward sustainability and will match what we get in admissions up to \$10,000. We plan to use the money for the festival and also to present music during the year.”

Another key to the fest's success has been the collaboration between KCH and the Dept. of Jazz & Contemporary Improvisation at the University of Michigan, as well as faculty members such as pianist Stephen Rush, professor of Performing Arts Technology, who will collaborate with John Hollenbeck. “U of M supports the festival with student activities or funding for master classes,” said Relyea. “Students can rub shoulders with experienced artists. It's an excellent opportunity for students and the university's brilliant faculty.” —Alain Drouot