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Jazz in June: Sorting Through the Abundance

By BEN RATLIFF and NATE CHINEN

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AS usual, jazz pervades June in New York City. Besides better-than-normal bookings in the clubs, we're looking at the first Blue Note Jazz Festival (monthlong), the second Undead Jazzfest (June 23 to 26) and the 16th Vision Festival (Sunday through June 11).

It's a different landscape from the usual one: there's no George Wein-produced festival in town, since the retreat of his major sponsors. This means few produced, big-theater shows around a person or a theme, the kind of thing that almost defined the summer jazz calendar in the city. It also means the absence of some of the music's recurring festival stars, your Wayne Shorters or Keith Jarretts or Brad Mehldaus — they've already done their New York business for the year. Someone else will claim our attention this June.

Ben Ratliff and Nate Chinen, jazz writers for The New York Times, sorted it out on Mr. Ratliff's weekly Popcast. Below is an edited version of their conversation.

BEN RATLIFF Nate, why does June always look this way?

NATE CHINEN In 1972 George Wein decided to move his Newport festival to New York, and decided on June because Carnegie Hall and Avery Fisher Hall, the two places he wanted to use, were shuttered for the season, so he was able to get the spaces he wanted at that time. His original idea was, "We can't do a big festival in a field, like we do at Newport, so let's turn Midtown New York into that idea."

RATLIFF So the JVC Jazz Festival — later, the CareFusion Jazz Festival — was the behemoth. Which is not to say that it had no point of view.

CHINEN He always had his biggies, his heavyweights. There was a period, in the '70s, when that was Freddie Hubbard and Sonny Rollins; a little later, in the '80s, it was Sarah Vaughan and Dizzy Gillespie, at a time when people said, "That's no longer cutting-edge." But Sarah Vaughan, year after year, would sell out Carnegie Hall.

RATLIFF Now, in the absence of JVC, we've got three smaller festivals, almost entirely happening in the clubs — or, in the case of Vision Festival, at the Abrons Arts Center on the Lower East Side.

CHINEN It's a decentralization that has to do with that absence. It costs a lot of money to reserve those big halls and pay the union costs. And between these three festivals, you've got three pretty different philosophies of booking a festival. Vision has the clearest identity of the three. It has to do with post-1960 avant-garde and free jazz. In many cases the same figures crop up in different combinations. William Parker, the bassist — if you look at this year's schedule, I think he's playing in eight or nine different groups during the course of the week.

RATLIFF He's a founder of the festival, but in general the festival cultivates its heroes.

CHINEN There's a ton of veneration in it. In recent years they've had a lifetime achievement honoree — this year it's the German saxophonist Peter Brötzmann. And then there are tributes to Vision Festival regulars who have passed on in the last year, Marion Brown and Billy Bang.

RATLIFF Undead is sort of the no-great-man festival. It's more about what's happening now; it's more musicians from their 20s to, let's say, their early 50s. It's harder to tell categorically what's going on.

CHINEN And it has a lot of people overlapping with the Vision Festival. Paradoxical Frog, a group that put out one of my favorite jazz records last year, is playing in both festivals: on the Vision Festival, augmented by the violist and violinist Mat Maneri, and without him at Undead. David S. Ware, whom you'd put in the pantheon of Vision Festival heroes, is playing an Undead solo performance at Homage skate park in Brooklyn. That's another thing about this year's Undead that I really like: It moves away from the West Village. It reflects how much of this music is now based in Brooklyn, not only by virtue of where the musicians live, but also where the music is being played.

RATLIFF The Blue Note festival is business logic as much as anything else. The Blue Note jazz club, the Highline Ballroom and the B. B. King Blues Club and Grill are operated by the same people. So the Blue Note jazz festival takes place in those venues, with a couple of shows that seem added on. It fills some gaps left by the disappeared George Wein festivals: sentimental favorites, fusion and tributes. So there's Dave Brubeck; there's Hiromi, the aging wunderkind; there's Albitta's tribute to Celia Cruz; there's Jon Hendricks's 90th-birthday celebration.

CHINEN And the 85th-birthday celebration for Jimmy Scott. It feels almost cynically like rushing into the void left by JVC-slash-CareFusion.

RATLIFF And for what purpose, you know?

CHINEN It has a commercial instinct that I only halfway understand. There's a night during the festival, the 18th, when the Blue Note Jazz Festival concerts are Chaka Khan at B. B. King's, Madeleine Peyroux at the Highline, Manhattan Transfer at the Blue Note and Vinx at the Blue Note.

RATLIFF It's like, what year is it? So you've got three festivals with varying degrees of aesthetic control. And there are surprises — concerts within one festival that seem entirely as if they should be in another. Which is a good sign; it means the whole scene is less frozen. The drummer Greg Saunier, from Deerhoof, is collaborating with the jazz saxophonist Andrew D'Angelo at the Blue Note, June 10, 12:30 in the morning, as part of the Blue Note festival. That sounds like Undead. And then Tomasz Stanko at the Vision Festival: that seems more Undead or even Blue Note. He's a big name; he's got the last track on the new Smithsonian jazz anthology.

CHINEN That whole night at Vision, June 7, is presented in conjunction with the Festival of New Trumpet Music — another thing that happens in June, with a much quieter impact but a lot of serious musicians. So in addition to Tomasz Stanko, Amir ElSaffar is playing that night, and Ted Daniel and Jonathan Finlayson.

RATLIFF What should a jazz festival in New York look like? Is there a better model than what we see here?

CHINEN What I'm missing from all this is something that the JVC festival, at its best, could do: a really big concert with an idea. Not just a birthday tribute, not just a stop on someone's tour, but a concert that's produced and makes a point about something.

RATLIFF But that's a one-night-only thing, and contrary to the natural reality of jazz.

CHINEN Oh, it's totally artificial. But when I look at the abundance here, it's what I miss.

RATLIFF How do you feel about the Undead model of the concertgoer shuttling back and forth along a three-block radius in the West Village or Williamsburg, seeing a ton of music in one night?

CHINEN I love the idea of an overspill, the messiness of it. It fosters discovery, and it creates the festive atmosphere. In the past, during the last Winter Jazzfest — which is related to the Undead Fest, with the same organizers — you wrote about the danger of overpopularity, when the scales tip, and a pleasantly overcrowded experience becomes an unpleasant one. I hope that what they're doing here, branching out to Brooklyn, will address that.

RATLIFF I expect to see you on the rialto about 76 times over the month. Be careful out there.