

## A Greensboro hit - Greensboro News & Record: N&R Editorials

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JOSEPH RODRIGUEZ/News & Record



The audience reacts to gospel singer Mavis Staples at the National Folk Festival in Greensboro Saturday, Sept. 12, 2015.

Greensboro put on a terrific show over the weekend, turning all of downtown into a performing arts center.

The 75th National Folk Festival, and first in North Carolina, went off with no bigger problems than a little rain Saturday.

“It was wonderful,” Mayor Nancy Vaughan said. “If you couldn’t find something you liked, you didn’t have a pulse.”

Few of the thousands who attended had that complaint. The variety of music clearly delighted audiences. Whether it was Afro-Cuban, country-honk tonk, New Orleans jazz, Irish, bluegrass or gospel, it was received with appreciation and hand-clapping, foot-stomping, hip-swaying enthusiasm. Gospel singer Mavis Staples might have drawn the largest crowd to her Belk Stage performance Saturday, but probably not by much.

The festival was an artistic success. Organizers secured a diverse lineup of talented musicians — most of whom may have been unfamiliar to people here. They promoted headliners, such as Staples and Rhiannon Giddens, and let audiences discover the rest. It turned out that folk music means music of the

people — and the people who keep it alive and perform it come from many different traditions. What they have in common is a passion for sharing what they love.

The festival was a logistical success. Space was used strategically, with stages set up far enough apart to allow for several performances at once but close enough so that walking from one to another wasn't overly difficult. Food and drink vendors had good locations, as did visual artists, craftsmen and even street performers. While many streets were closed, parking decks were open and traffic was directed effectively around the festival edges. Buses moved people from remote parking areas. Police officers were everywhere to make sure everyone was safe, but it looked like this wasn't difficult. Crowds were well-behaved.

The festival was a city success. Greensboro showed well again, as it did during the Wyndham Championship last month, the basketball tournaments in March and the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in January. It justified its selection to host the festival, which it will do again in 2016 and 2017. Based on experience in other cities, attendance could increase by 50 percent next year, Tom Phillion, ArtsGreensboro president and CEO, said.

Then? "Our plan is to do it in perpetuity," Vaughan said.

This would follow the example of Richmond, Va., which hosted the National Folk Festival from 2005 through 2007 and transformed that into the annual Richmond Folk Festival.

And it was a state success.

"It was thrilling to be there," said N.C. Secretary of Cultural Resources Susan Kluttz, who attended Saturday. "I am so excited by how well things went."

The N.C. Arts Council sponsored the North Carolina Traditions Stage and Pottery Demonstration Area, showcasing state talent. Maybe it can provide additional support beginning in 2018 if the event is recast as the North Carolina Folk Festival.

While there was no admission charge for events, the festival was far from free. Costs were covered by a long list of corporate sponsors and the city; much of the manpower was supplied by volunteers; and attendees were asked to drop donations into buckets. Whether it all adds up to a viable financial model may take some calculation.

What were the benefits? Kluttz said the arts add to quality of life and play a role in job creation and economic development. Studies support that idea. Certainly, downtown businesses, as well as vendors selling everything from beer to ice cream, hoped to make money.

But particularly gratifying, said Phillion, was hearing from people, " 'Thank you for bringing this event to Greensboro.' We are so delighted that this was a huge success and seemed to make so many people happy."