

Local News

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Organizers say downtown festival drew its biggest crowds to date



Yonder Mountain String Band performs Saturday night. (Doug Janz / Johnson City Press)

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According to initial estimates, this was the biggest crowd the Blue Plum Downtown Art & Music Festival has ever drawn, putting it at more than last year's 35,000 people. And most of them, it appeared, had a pretty good time.

"The comments I got from people attending were extremely positive," said Christine Murdock. "The thing that I heard from a lot of people is that the arts and crafts just keep getting better, and there was more of it, and more for the kids to do.

"What was really fun Saturday was before the music got started, and the whole area around Roan was where it was happening. Kids were

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dancing, stuff was going on onstage and there were lots of activities.

“And the music, as always, was great.”

The Friends of Olde Downtowne organized the sixth annual festival, and Murdock is the point person for the overall coordination. Despite the many small problems that inevitably plague a major event, this one once again went off very smoothly, she said. The streets stayed crowded almost all the time, and the music lineup culminated with Saturday night headliner Yonder Mountain String Band, bringing in a huge and enthusiastic crowd that covered the main intersection of Buffalo and Main streets where the stage was situated.

While the people weren't packed in as tightly along Main as three years ago for Nickel Creek's show, that's a deceiving standard to measure by, music coordinator Ellen Buchanan said.

“I think we had more this year than Nickel Creek because back then, the stage wasn't moved back into the intersection where it is now, it was farther up Main, so there was more of a bottleneck.”

The music schedule included some funk, Celtic, bluegrass, Appalachian reggae, oldtime music, rock 'n' roll covers, newgrass, blues, jazz and a few genre 'tweeners. Yonder Mountain was far and away the crowd favorite, but both days were filled with talented acts. At this stage in its musical career, Blue Plum has raised its standard to the point there are no weak acts, just acts that are hotter than others at the time.

“Ellen's done it again,” Murdock said. “She just has her finger on the pulse.”

The food court, on Market Street, was bigger than ever, as was the arts area on the upper half of Main Street.

“There were more people demonstrating (arts) and that's exciting,” said Dick Nelson, coordinator for the art vendors. “That aspect of the festival is drawing crowds and people are spending money. It's nice to be able to tell artists that their stuff will sell. And there is some really good stuff here. I think people have started to realize that about Blue Plum.”

Janis Numan, coordinator of the food court, said the response was so good that some vendors were asking if they could go ahead and pay their fee for next year's festival so as not to risk missing out. The food court was so successful, in fact, that it cut into the food sales of some downtown clubs and restaurants, although most of them may have made up for that in other sales, simply because so many customers were in and out the doors.

The annual Freeze homemade ice cream competition was a big success, with the Tri-Cities Hillbilly Parrothead Club taking first prize on the strength of their Key Lime Pie ice cream. PET sponsored it, giving away free ice cream and taking donations for the Johnson City Children's Hospital.

Rain was a very minor problem. The festival took one huge drenching on Friday afternoon, but the rest of that day and night only saw a few sprinkles, and Saturday was blazing hot, without a cloud in the sky for much of the day.

The inaugural Blue Plum Animation Festival, a unique part of the weekend, also deserves to be brought to the forefront more, Murdock added. The festival committee will meet in a few weeks to review this year's event and look toward 2006.

“From my own point of view,” Numan added, “I'd really like to thank all the people who've put so much into this. Some of them have put a lot of effort into this and they don't get that much thanks.”

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