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Blue Plum '06 - Rollicking Saturday helps festival crowd forget about stormy Friday



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Hector Qirko Band performs in front of a large crowd Saturday at the Blue Plum. (Dave Boyd / Johnson City Press)

By Doug Janz
Press Tempo Writer
djanz@johnsoncitypress.com

Blue Plum Festival 2006 nearly drowned on Friday night, only to spring back to life Saturday in a big way.

The first day of the seventh annual music and arts festival in downtown Johnson City was all but washed away by torrential rains – the worst rains in festival history. Then the event rebounded with a spectacular Saturday that was as good as the first day was difficult.

“We’re pretending it was a one-day festival,” festival coordinator Christine Murdock said jokingly.

“That’s the whole thing with street festivals. They’re dicey because of the weather,” said Ellen Buchanan, the music coordinator. “But it’s a whole different atmosphere, and it’s such a boon to downtown Johnson City.”

The live music Friday was scattered. Hours of heavy rain cancelled two shows and prompted organizers to do something they’d never done before – move the headline acts indoors, to Gatsby’s.

Ironically, that’s about when the rain stopped, and the skies didn’t rain again until about 1:30 a.m. – right after The Drew Emmitt Band had completed its encore inside Gatsby’s.

“It was the toughest decision I’ve ever had to make,” Buchanan said, “and once I did, then it didn’t rain. But everything said it was going to keep raining, and sooner or later we had to make the call.

“Friday night was really tough. But we had a Plan B, and it worked.”

Several hundred fans packed into Gatsby’s to see Steel String Theory and The Drew Emmitt Band. It was a welcome return to the music after hours of showers that kept most people away from downtown, chased off many who were already there, closed down most of the vendor tents lining the streets and left the die-hard festivalgoers with little to do but sit under canopies or in the bars, drinking and waiting. The main stage was depressingly quiet.

Vendors and bar owners were grumpy about losing the income Blue Plum normally brings in. For most of the permanent food and beverage businesses, this is the biggest weekend of the year; some lost thousands of dollars due to the nasty weather. Tent vendors who’d paid to secure a spot

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saw their profit margin shrink away.

Stage and sound people dealt with the frustrating, touchy job of protecting expensive equipment. Cates Music, in charge of the sound, lost some equipment to the rain, despite best efforts. “They were real troopers,” Buchanan said.

By the end of the night, though, the festive atmosphere had returned. The Drew Emmitt Band, its front man well known for his work in Leftover Salmon, played into the night at Gatsby’s, and the lucky few hundred who knew about the show were given quite a treat. For them, all was right with the world, at least for a little while.

“Drew’s band loved it Friday night,” Buchanan said. “They said they’d never been treated so well. They basically drove all the way from Colorado for this, and a lot of people had driven from other places to see the band. So they were gonna play someplace. When we looked at the different indoor places that could house a show like this – the size of the room, the stage, the sound equipment – there really was only one option. And he put on a great show.”

Saturday opened with sunny, cool temperatures for the 8 a.m. Blue Plum 5K run, and the rest of the day was perfect. Umbrellas gave way to sunscreen lotion. Downtown was a completely different world from the night before, with families filling the streets, diners sitting at sidewalk tables, artisans showing off their work and a consistently good crowd surrounding the main stage. While festival organizers didn’t have a crowd size estimate for the weekend, Saturday’s looked to be on par with the previous years.

The crowd in front of the main stage swelled into the thousands as night fell, and The Waybacks set the stage for headliner Railroad Earth. By the end of the show, the masses were in a dancing frenzy, and when it was over, everyone was smiling.

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