

GOOD VIBES



COMMUNITY FESTIVAL

1972-2012

40 CARROT GOLD

What makes ComFest special? Why is this festival different from all other festivals? It depends who you ask.

Most people single out ComFest for the welcoming attitude and the inclusive atmosphere, as well as the high caliber of presentations. On top of that, everybody has stories about “ComFest Magic,” which is something like essence of “serendipity. Long-lost friends collide; finders don’t keep but return lost valuables; the precise tool comes to hand at the critical moment; volunteers pour out of the woodwork when needed.

A purely rational analysis determines that ComFest uniquely combines five features, of which other fests

may have two or three at most: the fest is urban, free, volunteer-run, non-corporate and explicitly progressive.

This means you don’t have to drive for 12 hours and pay hundreds of dollars to see topnotch acts; you can stay out late, take the bus

home and sleep in your own bed after seeing incredible performances on any of six stages — for free. The peace and justice groups are not exiled to the margins, but infused throughout the entire site and schedule. The festival grounds are blissfully free of corporate logos. Everything seems thoughtfully designed by end-users, and there are plenty of friendly veteran volunteers ready to answer any question.

All of that good practice and good vibes and maybe even some of the good luck comes from one source, the feature that truly distinguishes Community Festival: the Statement of Principles, with its explicit declaration of intent to act collectively for social justice. With this



powerful distillation of a progressive agenda in hand, what started as a group of mostly white young college grads built a community that is diverse in background and united in intent.

And this community, acting together and constantly refreshed with new members, has gone on to elect better representatives and build lasting institutions, just as ComFest’s founders dreamed.

Here’s the story so far.

In 1971 the civil rights movement’s dream of a beloved community based in peace and dedicated to justice drew together a few dozen OSU area residents to start a group called Community Union, which



gathered at the Wesley Foundation on 16th Avenue at Waldeck. Angered by the lack of basic human services in the city and by unresponsive political leadership in the University area, these mostly young, mostly white activists, artists, students and shopkeepers pulled together the beginnings of what they hoped would be an alternative neighborhood alignment capable of electing better city government while supporting broader progressive political values.

Community Union meetings quickly grew to fill the auditorium at Wesley as the founders struggled to come up with a grassroots organization that could translate radical dreams into practical realities. By the beginning of 1972, a proposal to have a two-day block party to share and show off had drawn wide support.

Members of the Tenants Union, Food Co-op, Switchboard, *Columbus Free Press*, and Open Door Clinic joined members of the Gay Activists Alliance, the Women's Action Collective, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, the National Lawyers Guild, the fledgling video co-op and the creative arts co-op to put on a block party intended to draw students across High Street for a free concert and some gentle brainwashing.

The Campus Ministry Association managed to get a street closing permit to create the festival grounds from



a triangular intersection bounded by Wesley, Hillel and the United Christian Center, just a half-block from High. Plans for the party started to spread by word of mouth and the pages of the *Free Press*.

The mood of festival organizers going into the weekend of the first fest was tense but determined. In the weeks leading to May 12, Community Union had taken up the increasingly urgent issue of police misconduct, following heavy-handed treatment of protestors and the shooting death of a teenager during a small-time drug bust. Columbus

police had agreed to let the fest provide its own security, but nobody believed they would stay out.

One CU organizer wrote in that same issue of the *FreePress* about the group's intent to form an alternative Peace Force:

"Our people must have common sense and cool judgment, they must be essentially non-violent ... and they must believe that senior citizens, elementary school kids, street freeks, eastsiders, bikers, Rod McKuen fans, teenyboppers, *everyone* is their brother or sister, and deal with them as you deal with someone you care about — even if you happen to be angry at the moment."

"The Community Festival," founder Libby Gregory concluded, "provides us with a perfect experimental situation for forming our own Peace Force... It's a fantastic opportunity to learn to deal with our own



problems.” She had no idea how prophetic that would prove to be.

The day before the festival, May 11, 1972, anti-war activists enraged by Nixon's decision to attack North Vietnam's main harbor decided to occupy the intersection of 15th Avenue and High Street.

According to police, it was a riot, and overnight the first arrests targeted individuals the Red Squad had identified as leaders of the Indochina Coalition. Eventually, 122 people were arrested. Eleven of those faced multiple serious charges, including inciting to riot, and were held on extremely high bail.

Six of the major arrests took prominent members of Community Union: four *Free Press* staffers, two Switchboard staffers.

The next morning, the first Community Festival set up on a makeshift stage just one block away from the “riot” of the night before. The fest continued for two days, and by Saturday afternoon some of those arrested on Thursday night were speaking from the stage to raise bail and legal defense money for others, including two attorneys who had been arrested when they went to bail out the first round of defendants.

But the music went on, and the dancing, too. “We knew that we would survive this, as long as we stuck together and carried it on,” says one of the Defense Fund's coordinators looking back on the rollercoaster events of that spring. “By busting activists from so many groups all at



The Indochina Coalition defendants spent 2 1/2 years in court, where most of the charges were dismissed or defendants acquitted. Years later, a Freedom of Information Act request revealed that the defendants were targeted collectively for their political leadership, not individually for alleged violent street actions, and were fingered by an agent provocateur who lived in the activist community before vanishing. He's the one seen here dragging everybody else down.



once, the police forced us to work together on the defense, and that forged a strong bond. And by doing it just when the festival was starting up, they made sure our story got heard.”

Despite the arrests, the festival was so much fun that organizers decided to do it again.

By October 1975, organizers had plenty to celebrate: The fest itself, and the alternative culture that nurtured it, were maturing quickly.

In just three years since its founding, Community Festival had become the reunion



homeplace for independent musicians and craftspeople and political activists, with more new visitors following the music from High Street into the festival grounds every year. This time, there was the long-sought end of the American war in Vietnam to celebrate, as well as the end of the last Indochina Coalition “riot” trials, and the coalescing of a broad women’s liberation movement to push everything along faster, so organizers decided to also hold a Harvest Festival.

That weekend, the festival grounds were as crowded as organizers had ever seen them: there must have been three or four hundred people!

The feeling of success was exhilarating: the festival was doing exactly what it was meant to do, bringing all this talent and information to new audiences outside the approved channels, bringing in new seekers and potential activists. How could it get any better?

As it turns out, there’s apparently no limit to how much better it can get. Starting from that one stage made of plywood, 2x4s and scaffolding panels, the festival has since expanded to six stages, encompassing spoken word performances and workshops along with music, dance, martial and healing arts.

From a dozen card tables with pamphlets and cupcakes



For many years, the Gay Pride Parade (now the Pride Parade) formed along and marched through the Street Fair on ComFest Sundays on its route downtown.

and macrame plant hangers, the Street Fair has grown to an extensive and extremely competitive juried showcase of original art and crafts alongside an ever-expanding range of community service and advocacy groups.

Mixed in with the artists and craftspeople are nonprofit education and advocacy groups, for which ComFest has always been the most important weekend of the year to recruit new members and raise operating funds. Organizations sell T-shirts, buttons and bumper stickers, books and even catnip to further their causes.

And from one truck with one tap and a bunch of plastic pitchers, the Beer Committee grew a multi-bar operation that has brought in enough to endow the festival's Grants Program, which in turn has given \$80,000 to local nonprofits in recent years.

This last cycle alone, the Grants Program gave away ten times more money than the original festival cost to produce. Also in 2011, the Bike Corral grew to cover more lawn than the entire original festival grounds.

These are just some of the ways ComFest has grown into its mission. But it was a bumpy ride.

In the late 1970's a group of local activists, many of whom were involved in Community Festival, worked to expand the “good vibes” of the festival into year-round reality in a building that could give progressive groups a home base. Under an agreement with OSU to lease the former Northwood School on High Street for a dollar a year, the Northend Community Center





There was virtually no shade on the site, and the first festival there saw temperatures exceed 100 degrees for two of the three festival days. The women of the Uhuru Dancers cried as they danced on the black stage surface. The temperature hit 104 degrees while I-Tal's reggae rhythms coaxed people out of their lethargy to sway in what ComFest organizers called The Dust Bowl in front of the stage.



operated a recycling center, housed community groups and hosted concerts. The old red brick schoolhouse served as a center of progressive political activity until December 1982, when it was destroyed in a fire.

Community Festival then inherited NCC's recycling mission and adopted its Statement of Principles, which laid out the socialist politics of its founders:

We think that people ought to work for the collective good of all people rather than for personal gain. We support cooperation and collective activity rather than competition and individual profit.

The basic necessities of life are a right and not a privilege. People have the collective right to control the conditions of their lives.

People should strive to conduct their lives in harmony with the environment.

We recognize that there are primary attitudes which divide and oppress people. These attitudes are usually shown by prejudice against people on the basis of age, class, ability, income, race, sex and sexual preference/orientation. We seek to eliminate these attitudes.

The Statement of Principles is more important than any other writings of the Community Festival.



1970 - Major student protests at OSU but no Community Festival planned.

1972 - Indochina defendants arrested before 1st ComFest.

1973 - Comfest organizers deny Nixon access to Festival.

ComFest came into being when both women's issues and gay rights struggles had moved into the nation's TVs, workplaces, classrooms, and streets. A fundamental tenet of ComFest was respect for every person, and the Festival area quickly became a haven from the catcalling, harassment and physical violence against women and non-heterosexuals that were common in the larger culture.

Safety was routinely led by a woman, and founding member Sue Urbas developed training for volunteers to help "maintain the mellow" and assure that women and gays would not be harassed.

The fest's reputation has sometimes attracted men who saw its openness and freedom as license to act out crude demonstrations of traditional male dominance. Men holding hands with or kissing each other, and women feeling free to go topless (reinforced by a court ruling), was the new normal. Some wouldn't adapt to a changing culture. Safety volunteers had to confront and sometimes evict men who disregarded warnings to respect others within ComFest's accepting atmosphere.



As awareness of ComFest has spread, so has acceptance by more people of its egalitarian ethos: you can enjoy yourself and everything ComFest has to offer, but keep your comments and hands to yourself. Respect breeds respect.

In 1983 the festival moved to a new site in the Short North. Founding organizers Margaret Sarber and Roger Doyle were instrumental in finding and securing access to a vacant lot east of Park Street, where Victorian Gate now stands. The old White Cross Hospital (forerunner to Riverside) had stood on the site, and the ground was a combination of bleached scrub grass and bricks left from the demolition poking from the ground. Hours of work by ComFest volunteers pried out the rubble to provide a reasonably flat space.



1974 - Organizers forget to schedule Festival.

1976 - Chairman Mao attends ComFest. No one notices.

1983 - Pres. Reagan orders invasion of ComFest to rescue wayward medical students.

The move demonstrated that ComFest was becoming a community that existed beyond a geographic location or neighborhood. ComFest and its philosophy were moving from the margins, burrowing into the city's larger identity.

The original Community Union intended to both provide social services where none existed at the time and to raise consciousness of systemic problems and strategies for change. Today, that same DIY spirit and broadly inclusive progressive vision still animate successive generations of new



Festival organizers have worked hard to integrate campaigns for better political representation and policy solutions into every year's work. Voter registration drives at ComFest have added thousands of informed, networked voters to the rolls, and the festival routinely helps build support for progressive ballot initiatives.



Community Festival volunteers and supporting organizations. In recent years, the fest's emphasis on environmental sustainability has been an especially important model.

ComFest's aggressive promotion of recycling, bicycling, mass transit and alternative energy has introduced thousands of central Ohioans to higher standards for both mass public events and everyday living, and has contributed to raised public policy expectations on all those fronts.

1985 - ComFest accidentally books Margarine Dream.

1992 - 12 OSU frat brothers wearing baggy shorts and backwards baseball caps walk in file through the Street Fair and are mistaken for a giant scarlet centipede.

1995 - World's largest mayor not spotted at ComFest.



In 2012, the newly formed Peace Village finally gathers many threads from across the peace and justice movements together in one venue, expanding the reach and range of the Spirit and Purpose initiative within Community Festival through workshops on social issues, sustainability and healing arts. The diversity of issues is matched only by the diversity of presenters.

As ComFest has grown into its mission, hundreds of volunteer organizers have sat through what felt like thousands of years' worth of meetings to make this event, and the organization that produces it, sustainable and admirable. Producing the fest is more work than most people think is sane to do for free, yet every year there are new folks stepping forward to ask how they can help carry it on. The connection made between people from widely different backgrounds through the work of the festival organization is the biggest reason why sane people make this insane commitment.



And that same human connection, writ large, has contributed mightily to the growth of tolerance in Columbus over the past four decades. When



2000 - ComFest treasurer election stolen by electronic voting machine.

2001 - Mayor Coleman attends, not wearing tie-dye.

2005 - Eric Clapton plays ComFest using an alias and a fake mustache.

2006 - Short North changes its name to Festiville.



neighbors come together to celebrate collective action for justice and peace — the essence of ComFest's mission — differences become not obstacles but fuel for initiative and new perspectives.

There have been epic internal arguments on the road to ComFest as we know it today. Organizers have disagreed deeply over everything from nonprofit status to X-rated performances to credit cards. The exercise in self-governance dreamed of four decades ago by the festival's founders has become

a year-round reality for dozens of organizers, who quickly discover that cooperatively steering a mid-sized non-profit teaches everybody involved the value of patience and compromise.

What holds these fiercely independent-minded people together is the Community Festival Statement of Principles. Reinterpreting those Principles for each successive year, taking changing realities into account, is the core work of ComFest. Recalling that common agreement is what makes it possible to keep working to forge consensus.

Forty years ago, the first announcement for the first Community Festival read,

TO CREATE COMMUNITY

*We must play together as well as struggle together
and we should TEACH each other
all our best tricks — any art and every craft —
to assure that we will grow in strength and competence
and increase daily in wisdom and love
No society's gonna be about to change UNLESS
we change ourselves — its members.*

And that, finally, is what makes this festival different from all others: united through commitment to the Statement of Principles,



2008 - Willie Phoenix
rocks the festival.
Again.

2009 - Local critic writes
that ComFest isn't featuring
deceased blues artists.

2010 - ComFest reduces the
number of performing stages
from 94 to 6.

2012 - Fracking under
Goodale Park drains
pond.



ComFest changes society by changing the people who share in the fest.

This slow revolution has helped to make great changes in the culture of Columbus, but there's plenty left to do. The next step is up to you.

The history of Community Festival is still being written, year by year. If the Statement of Principles matches your view of the world and how to heal it, maybe this is the year you'll step up and start making history.



- Written, Designed and Edited by Mimi Morris, Michael Weber, Steve Abbott, Michael Gruber, Jonathan Johns
- Photos by Mimi Morris, Michael Weber, Steve Abbott, Michael Gruber, John Gurney, Tom McGuire, ComFest Archives

- All photos copyrighted by the photographers
- ComFest TM is a registered trademark of Community Festival, Inc.

comfest.com

“Where are all these people the rest of the year?”



All around you.

