

An original concept

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ST. CATHARINES -- Through the past five years, the Cicada Music Festival has attracted increasingly larger crowds and thousands of dollars in government funding.

But, despite the attention, it remains focused on presenting original and independent music, said organizer and co-founder Roger Marin.

This year's three-day festival begins Friday at Henley Island in Port Dalhousie and features a range of local and international artists.

The lack of original music-driven festivals and clubs in the region prompted Marin and St. Catharines photographer, Thom Lepp, to start the festival several years ago.

"There are a lot (of festivals) about food and wine but they are never just about actual music," said Marin, who is also a musician.

"I toured 250 days a year everywhere but home because I couldn't get a gig at home. So we thought, we're going to start our own festival, I'll start my own gig."

But now, it's not just about booking a gig in the region -- although Marin is headlining the festival.

His favourite part of the event is providing a platform for developing songwriters to perform, he said.

Recently, Marin was asked to judge a songwriting competition in Niagara Falls and the experience crystallized that sentiment.

"I was just blown away," he said. "There were performers at 12, 18 and 20-years-old. It was incredible, but I thought, 'they're never going to have a place to play around here because it's always cover bands.'"

Marin reclined on an oversized chair in his living room in Niagara Falls and mused about the two 13-year-old girls performing at the festival on Saturday afternoon.

Jade Sammut and Leah Laveck are friends with one of Marin's daughters, and one day while visiting his home, they played one of their songs.

"They're amazing," he said. "What I really love is that Cicada Fest will have something to offer these people who write great songs."

And, it seems, that is also what the audience is looking for.

Five years ago, when the festival moved from Lepp's backyard to St. George's Serbian Park in Niagara Falls, under 200 people attended -- 100 of which, he said, were from the U.S. Two years ago that count increased to 800 people. And now, Marin expects 1,000-1,500 to attend.

"It doesn't feel empty but it's intimate," he said, adding he doesn't want it to get too big. It's important for the festival to retain its communal atmosphere, he said.

Marin spends much of the year on the road -- and has the oversized tour bus parked in his driveway complete with couches, a bed and microwave to prove it.

He's played at major folk festivals and said he didn't want to have the same separation between the musicians and the audience at Cicada.

"There's no green room, there's no place for the musicians to go except with the crowds," he said.

"At any given time there is a band on stage and there are probably 20 musicians in the audience. It creates a sense of intimacy between the music and the people there."

Adding to that is the after-hours jams. Many people have told Marin they enjoy camping during the festival because at night, there are always groups of people scattered throughout the area playing everything from acoustic guitars and upright basses to violins, he said.

"The crowds are from all over the place," he said, noting many loyal followers travel great distances every year to attend. "They are people who just really love music."

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WHAT: Cicada Fest July 8 -10

WHERE: Henley Island, Port Dalhousie

TICKETS: Advance: \$15/ one day, \$40/ three days, \$99/three days with camping. At the gate: \$50/ three days.

Performers include: Roger Marin, Alun Piggins, Cindy Doire, Megan Lane and Mark Jungers.

INFORMATION: www.cicadafest.com

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