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Diversity an issue for Common Ground

By DANIEL STURM October 1, 2003 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 1059

By DANIEL STURM

Metaphorically speaking, the term "common ground" represents a gathering place where everyone is on equal footing.

With such a name, one would think that Lansing's largest outdoor music festival, the Common Ground at Adado Riverfront Park, would appeal to a wide spectrum of visitors.

But this year a special concert at the festival's east stage, which was geared toward Lansing's Latino and Hispanic residents, attracted less than 1,000 of 11,642 visitors that day. Some critics are saying that the Common Ground festival obviously appeals predominantly to the 45-year-old white male.

"It wasn't as diverse as it should have been," said Joe Graves Jr., former Mayor David Hollister's chief of staff. Graves said he'd heard several people complain that the music venues weren't diverse enough, though he said he understands the difficulty for a festival that's just 4 years old to compete with more established events in other cities.

Graves, who's active in a number of Lansing minority issues, said that diversifying the festival was a frequent topic of discussion during his four-year tenure at City Hall. In 2001, Graves and a group of African-American pastors organized a gospel program at the Lugin Stadium as part of the festival. The demand had been great enough that when planning the event he'd been able to raise the \$7,000 needed to cover expenses within five days.

"It was successful and paid for itself," recalls Graves. "[At the main festival] we had a mix of music that appealed to a wide range of people, including minority populations. And in addition to that we had the religious music, which of course had its own audience," said Graves.

Graves, a candidate for City Council in the 3rd Ward, said that if elected he'd push the city to organize a similar special event in the future.

Graves said that since the city sponsors the festival with \$100,000 annually, it should make sure the event reflects the diversity of the community as a whole. "I don't know if they tried to get a more diverse venue, and weren't able to, or did they not try," he said.

Lansing Mayor Tony Benavides said the city has tried to be more attractive to minorities but agreed that attendance at the Hispanic night wasn't satisfactory. Benavides blamed it on the absence of national talent. "We need nationally well-known acts that appeal to minority populations," he said.

Common Ground is run by a private organization, Meridian Entertainment Group, and the city through the Lansing Entertainment & Public Facilities Authority. It lost more than \$99,000 in 2000, its first year. Last year, the summer music festival broke even. This year it made a \$31,770 profit. General Motors and the City of Lansing are the festival's prime sponsors, contributing \$100,000 each to the overall \$1.2 million budget this year.

Guillermo Lopez, an equal opportunity specialist for the City's Human Relations and Community Services Department and adviser to the festival organizers, said this year's Latino night was an experiment. "The organizers tried to get national acts such as Los Lobos but ended up having only local bands. It was a matter of timing."

Lopez said the city has made an effort to appeal to all ethnic groups. "It all began six years ago, when former Mayor David Hollister wanted to support ethnic festivals in Lansing," Lopez remembers that their efforts included the gospel concert at Lugnut's stadium, and the Hispanic Festival Del Verano at the Lansing Center.

Lopez said he is positive about the event's future, saying he'd seen "more diversity come in" within the last four years. He suggested that the organizers make an effort to book national acts that appeal to minority audiences earlier than they did this year. "We'll have to work with the promoter to get a broader audience in 2004."

Festival director Kevin Meyer said critics needed to be patient, since the festival was still growing. "It's the first time that we put together an Hispanic package like that. We knew we wouldn't have 5,000 people at the east stage. But we wanted to broaden the genres of music."

Meyer estimates that the three Latino bands on the east stage, Chac Mul Rock, Mas Ambicion and Megan, drew 1,000 people earlier in the evening. But when the better-known rock band Hootie & The Blowfish began to play, he said a lot of people "grabbed their chairs and went over to the west stage."

Meyer said he believes people were attracted to genres of music and that ethnicity wasn't a main factor. "I'm sure there were people with Latino heritage who went to watch Hootie & The Blowfish, even though there were Latin bands there." Meyer also said that competition on the west stage was strong, featuring many better-known acts like Koko Taylor and The Lash.

When asked whether increasing the number of ethnic bands would increase minority attendance, Meyer replied: "No. We book different genres of music. And with the different genres, we attract different ethnic groups. But I don't book artists based on their race."

Meyer said they're looking at the quality of a band and their price. Although he wasn't able to specify the market value of this year's Latino bands, Meyer said none was expected to draw large crowds, except perhaps for Megan. "Even the large commercial popular bands we booked have never drawn tens of thousands of visitors. It takes a while to get there. You start out walking before you can run."

Meyer said another problem is that the Latin music scene isn't as broad as the commercial rock scene, making it more difficult to book a band at an affordable price. "Those acts are often expensive, so we can't program them and at the same time keep the ticket prices as reasonable as they are now."

And timing is always a problem, said Meyer. This year he'd made an effort to book the hip hop star LL Cool J as well as several other famous bands that would have broadened the spectrum of music. "We had an offer on the table, but LL Cool J ended up shooting a movie. Those bands confirm late, because they tend to come and go very quickly in their popularity."

Asked about his plans to diversify the festival's attendance in 2004, Meyer said he's considering a tented world music stage that accommodates 500 people. "The Latino package also added a nice flavor to the festival. This is something we're going to continue."

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