

How to Successfully Plan and Run a Virtual Festival



Interview with the Fort Langley Jazz Festival

GIGNU

THE FUTURE WAYS OF STAGING HYBRID EVENTS IS FOR FESTIVAL ORGANIZERS

The following is an interview GiGn conducted with Karen Zukas and Dave Quinn, the respective Executive and Artistic Directors of the Fort Langley Jazz Festival. The actions that the Fort Langley Jazz Festival have taken through the covid pandemic provide an excellent recent example of how event organizers can creatively and successfully stage virtual festivals, especially in light of all festivals likely to become a mix hybrid and traditional festivals, certainly during and even, post Covid.

GiGn: Dave and Karen, we met through our mutual efforts around supporting Co-Jazz, Canada's virtual online jazz festival. Tell us about the Fort Langley Jazz Festival. We know you're a fairly young festival and smaller than some but you have been growing quickly and you've had some outstanding results so far.

Karen: *Yes, we're relatively new. We were incorporated in 2018. We're a community festival put on by the community. We offer great music and arts entertainment in the environment of a quaint, historic village with many interesting shops, cafes, bistros, galleries and so on. Our Festival has been successful and a lot of the reason for this is because of the hard work of many passionate*

volunteers and our sponsors, funders and supporters. It's a wonderful community to be a part of that celebrates music, art and culture.

GiGn: And you've grown quickly, right?



Karen Zukas, Executive Director, Fort Langley Jazz Festival

Karen: Yes, that's right. The first festival in 2018 was a day-and-a-half-long and then we expanded the 2019 festival to three days, and added more music, more venues, more headliner ticketed events, more art, and more for children to do.

Our festival has featured everything from New Orleans type Mardis Gras parades to open the festival, world-class jazz acts on outdoor stages, very talented youth and

emerging talent performing at pop-up stages to all-star blues shows. We've included art exhibits, jazz education workshops, salsa dance lessons and interviews around the history of jazz performances, JazzFest after parties at local restaurants and a lot of appealing things for people to come and enjoy.



Youth Events at Fort Langley Jazz Festival



GiGn: And then for 2020 you like all of us in the festival business, your festival plans were dramatically altered with Covid. However, you seem to have worked through this pretty well compared to many summer festivals in Canada. How did you do this?



Dave Quinn, Artistic Director, Fort Langley Jazz Festival

Dave: When Covid emerged in March (2020) we were very concerned we wouldn't be able to offer a festival this year as we had in the past. So, we decided to look seriously at doing something virtually. Before doing so though, we really tried to research all the options about how to do this effectively. It meant that our festival, which normally would be held in July, didn't get held until Sept. It took us down the road of a very different approach to holding a festival virtually, given the situation with covid.

GiGn: And fortunately, it was very successful. You had something like an estimated 10,000 people attending a virtual festival. That's fantastic for any festival and especially for one as new as yours. You received some great press coverage and a lot of testimonials as well from people who participated in and/or benefited from your work. Our readers can go to this link to read some of the testimonials:

<https://www.fortlangleyjazzfest.com/what-people-say>

Karen: Yes, it was very successful. It was successful because we did a lot of work up front to determine just how to go about it to make it work for our attendees and sponsors. All through the spring for example, we did a lot of research to inform our strategy for holding a virtual festival. The research told us a number of things were critically important like for example, production quality is key for a successful virtual festival - our survey results indicated that there was a fear, or even an expectation that virtual festivals will have poor production quality.

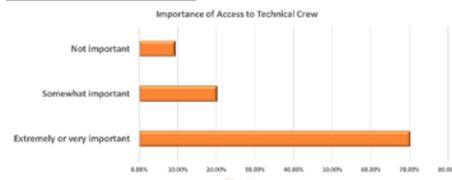
Dave: Yes, quality of production was key. I was concerned based on what we had been seeing on Facebook and Instagram back in March and April 2020 that it would be very possible that by the time that our virtual festival happened, people would be completely fatigued by virtual events—especially if they featured the low quality production people had been seeing coming from artists performing from their living rooms doing a solo act with a single camera on Facebook or something. One of the most important things we did was engaged a really good technical crew from the beginning.



Historic Train Station Fort Langley

GiGn : Great advice Dave. If you want it to look professional you have to have it built by professionals. That's what we found earlier this year in our own research when we interviewed a number of festivals across Canada in the early days of Covid. As the chart adjacent shows, 90% of event sponsors need to rely on competent technical crews to stage these events.

Importance of Access to Good Technical Crew



Karen: This also applies to the virtual festival attendees. We came to realize early in our research that many people didn't understand what virtual festivals really were and how they could watch them. For example, when doing a virtual event... simply streaming performances is not enough on its own. You need to have a central hub for performances to make it easy for the audience to engage in the program. We felt a good online festival should also incorporate offline experiences as well to create interactive online experience beyond a simple stream of a musical performance. For example, our festival had conversations with audiences before and during the festival and we made it interesting and compelling for audiences to stay engaged through contests, we had give-aways, interviews with artists and a range of different things for people to see and participate in. We felt that we needed to create a virtual venue as a place for audiences to interact with one another

and attend events. We created a festival experience for audiences such as the salsa dance party and Backyard Festivals where people could get together in their covid bubble to participate in the festival together.



Mardi Gras strolling band Fort Langley Jazz Festival

GiGn: What else did you learn from your research and your experience running a virtual festival that you think would be important for others to know who are wanting to replicate your success.

Karen: You need to define your target audience and determine how to stay true to your brand through a virtual festival. In terms of target audience for example, we know ours is heavily weighted toward an older age group that don't have as much experience with streaming technologies. So we produced a series of 'instructions on how to access the show' in PDF format and made those widely available. We also wanted to make the virtual festival sustain our brand as a fun, inclusive and celebrates all forms of art and jazz that welcomes everyone regardless of age, taste in music, background or ability to pay for shows.



GiGn: So what did the festival look like once you did all of your research?

Dave: We offered both a free all-day festival supported by sponsors, and exclusive, ticketed live shows. We used a combination of pre-recorded concerts and live streamed performances. We hosted exclusive interviews with each performing artist that were available on-demand during the festival and on the festival's YouTube channel. We produced and streamed community spotlight videos showcasing local Fort Langley arts and culture organizations and sponsors and made them available on the festival website and our

YouTube channel. We created Backyard Festivals where socially distanced groups could come together at their homes with festival-provided screens, programs, food and refreshments. We created interactive festival experiences such as a pre-festival online salsa dance lesson and a Moment of Joy during the performance by Mazacote where we could try our salsa moves from the comfort of home. We hosted a virtual artwalk featuring 26 local artists and galleries and a virtual marketplace. Basically we tried to replicate the experience people would have if we had been able to hold the festival as in pre-pandemic times.



GiGn: So seeing how thorough you both are in all of this you must have surveyed you attendees. If so, what did you learn from your experience after talking with those who attended?

Karen: *Our survey respondents told us that they were impressed with many aspects about the festival including the free music, production quality, Friday and Saturday night live streamed concerts and engaging with the festival. Respondents told us that they want to see more online concerts by the festival in the future (78%) and are more likely to purchase tickets to future festival virtual events after having watched our virtual festival (77%). For every person watching a ticketed show, we estimated we had 2.6 additional viewers. For every person watching a free show, we estimated we had 2.2 additional viewers.*



GiGn: That's very interesting that your research, like ours, revealed that if people liked something online about 66% indicated they are more likely to attend the

78% so I would say you've been very successful on that measure. Given this, I'm assuming you will plan to keep a virtual component to your festival even once we've made history of all of this covid lockdown.

Karen: *Yes, given the success of our 2020 Virtual Festival, we are planning to keep the virtual portion of the festival and will be offering both an online + in-person portion to the festival, hopefully in July 2021 assuming covid has been contained and we can reopen back to normal.*

GiGn: Karen, Dave, thanks to both of you for sharing your experience. You are well advanced in your thinking compared to many festivals. Congratulations, well done!

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event in person again if they are able to. In your case the number was even higher at



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