

Jazz Fest crowds worry patrons, burden Mid-City and neighboring residents

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From the Mid City Messenger

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*Sir Elton John greets the massive crowd from the Acura Stage on Saturday during Jazz Fest 2015.
(submitted photo)*

The second weekend of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival presented by Shell brought massive crowds to the New Orleans Fairgrounds, prompting many locals and tourists alike to complain about the long lines, crowded stages and traffic congesting the area. Some even raised safety concerns, asking if emergency personnel would be able to get to festival patrons in time should an accident occur.

On Saturday, in particular, three big acts that closed out the stage drew humongous crowds: Elton John on the Acura Stage, rapper T.I. on the Congo Square Stage and British Singer Ed Sheeran on the Gentilly Stage.

“It was crazy. It was some of the biggest crowds I’ve ever seen, and I’m from here,” **52-year-old Cricket Taylor, whose husband owns a bar in New Orleans**, told The New Orleans Advocate.

In another article in The New Orleans Advocate, Paul Wertheimer, founder of Crowd Management Strategies, a Los Angeles-based international crowd safety consulting service, **said the number of people packed into the closed environment “dangerous” and “irresponsible.”**

“The Jazz Festival organizers have created a situation of mayhem that pits ticket holder against ticket holder and practically guarantees chaos and possible worse if it isn’t contained,” he told The Advocate, adding that dense crowding at festivals like these can cause deaths or serious injuries by crushing people or preventing emergency responders from being able to reach people who may be suffering from ailments like heat exhaustion.



A monitor shows crowds packed to the edge of the field at the Acura Stage during Elton John’s performance. (submitted photo)

The number of patrons who attended Jazz Fest this year weren’t yet made available. But last year saw a spike in crowds, according to producers: They estimated that in 2014 the festival attendance reached 435,000, marking a two percent increase from the 2013 total of 425,000 people.

Festival-goers weren’t the only ones affected by the Jazz Fest mayhem over the weekend. Several Mid-City, Faubourg St. John and other neighboring residents took to social media to express their displeasure at the noise, congestion and mess the throngs of out-of-towners left behind.

“Attn: Festers. Our yard is not your bathroom. Respect this neighborhood!!!” one sign posted in the Jazz Fest area read, and was shared on Instagram and Facebook.

Yet another resident said she found vomit in her gardening trash can at the end of one Jazz Fest day.

Locals also noted that there seemed to be more issue this year concerning lack of parking spaces for both cars and bicycles. By early afternoon Saturday, reports indicated that bike racks along Jazz Fest's perimeters had all been filled. And several residents noted that more cars seemed to be booted and towed in the area than in years past — even in spaces far away from the Fairgrounds, such as on the other side of Canal Street.

Some said problems with traffic extended to neighboring areas, including the Treme.

“One thing my friends reported when they were returning to the Treme was how many near accidents there were along Esplanade,” said Mid-City resident, server and microkrewe ‘tit Rex member Janine Hayes. “Bikes, cars and buses were constantly almost colliding with each other. It was a traffic zoo and felt very dangerous.”

New Orleans musician and local resident Alexandra Scott also recounted an unpleasant exchange with a couple from Alabama, after they had moved a trash can she had put in front of her house to save a parking spot.

According to Scott, the couple moved the cans, then protested when she explained that she was a resident and needed the space saved. As she explained, sometimes saving space is necessary — as it was one year when she was on crutches and needed to be able to be close to her house after leaving the hospital following surgery.

Scott was one of many to comment on social media about signs residents left in their yards, asking for better behavior from visitors.

“This is why we get Fest Fatigue in my hood: picking up strangers' garbage, having them pee in our gardens, entitled out-of-towners acting like damn fools,” Scott wrote. “Let's do better, Jazzfesters.”