

How Festival of Friends booked Sugarhill Gang

The Festival of Friends is packed with acts from different genres and decades.

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Tha Hamilton Spectator

By Cheyenne Bholla



The Sugarhill Gang perform at Festival of Friends' second day, Sat, Aug. 2. (Hamilton Spectator file photo)

General manager Robert Rakoczy was on a layover from a vacation in Spain when he got the email confirming Sugarhill Gang would perform at Festival of Friends this year.

But to add to his excitement, Rakoczy would soon receive another call from the agent asking if there was enough in the budget to add American rappers Melle Mel and Scorpio from The Furious Five, known for the legendary song “The Message.”

Since Sugarhill Gang was one of the first acts he booked, there was, he said.

“I was like ‘Are you kidding me? I have Sugarhill Gang, but now I can add Grandmaster Flash’s guys?’” said Rakoczy.

They are hip hop legend drops in the bucket of performances set for Friday to Sunday , all viewed for free, at Gage Park (1000 Main St. E.).



Sister Sledge performs on the second day of Festival of Friends, Sat, Aug. 2. (Hamilton Spectator file photo)

Girl group Sister Sledge (“We Are Family”), Canadian country singer Brett Kissel, Canadian indie rock-folk artists Dan Mangan and the returning Hamilton rock band The Trews exemplify the festival’s diverse lineups that continue to span across eras and genres.

The event has featured Tanya Tucker (“Delta Dawn”) and Village People (“YMCA”) in 2024, Taboo from the Black Eyed Peas in 2013 and Don McLean (“American Pie”) in 2007.

Getting Village People proved fruitful, as Rakoczy worked through the same agent to get Sugarhill Gang. After sorting through availabilities, receiving the final OK was thrilling, he said, but not unexpected.

Rakoczy landed on Sister Sledge once he decided to follow an ’80s theme. Booking them required some more discussion, with him negotiating accommodation for a growing number of bands.

“What gets the attention, what brings people to the park, what gets them excited is giving them something different,” said Rakoczy.

“If we want to grow, we have to expand and we have to include more people in the festival.”

Despite the famous performances featured at the festival, it remains free, and Rakoczy said thanks is owed to the sponsors.

The festival takes about \$600,000 to run, about 10 per cent of which Rakoczy said goes to wages. More than half goes to setting up the stage and paying for performers.

Tim Hortons, the presenting sponsor, and Second Shop are 90 per cent of the sponsorship money, he said.

“If you were to sum it up, it’s money, timing and reputation of the festival,” said Rakoczy.

He hopes attendees can continue to show loyalty to the festival to keep it going.

“I think the key to that is to stick to our roots, while still expanding,” said Rakoczy.

Even before the weekend, Rakoczy is thinking about next year’s Festival of Friends, which will be its 50th anniversary. He said it will be the biggest Hamilton has seen.

“This is what gets me excited about the festival is like the next thing, what’s next year? Can we do bigger, can we do more?”

For the full lineup, timings and more information, go to festivaloffriends.ca.

Cat and Fiddle

Rock artist Kurt Tweedle plays Cat and Fiddle (174 John St. S.) on Saturday Aug. 2 from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m.

The event celebrates Tweedle’s birthday, featuring a “hot sauce challenge,” and other artists, such as Dean Fulton, Carl De Souza and Marlon Nicolle.

Entry is pay what you can.

Ray Charles Tribute

An all-Canadian band of musicians perform a special concert to honour American singer-songwriter and pianist Ray Charles. Shawn and Ed Brewing Co. (65 Hatt St.) hosts the show on Friday Aug. 1 at 8 p.m., doors open at 6 p.m.

Regular seats are \$25, plus tax and a service fee, and guaranteed seats with backs are \$27.50, plus tax and a service fee.

Go to lagershed.com/events for more.

Crown and Press Gallery and Cafe

Grab seats to Folk and Feelings before the 80 available tickets are gone.

Juno Award-winner Frank Fiction hosts the live and intimate acoustic concert at the Crown and Press Gallery and Cafe (303 Ottawa St. N.) on Thursday, Aug. 7 at 7:30 p.m.

Fiction is also the co-founder of the gallery and café. Singer Eric Brandon plays the event after touring with country star Owen Riegling.

Tickets are \$20 in advance or \$25 at the door. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. Go to crownandpress.com/pages/events for tickets.

Hamilton Public Library

Hamilton Public Library hosts another Noon Hour Concert on Friday Aug. 1 at its central branch (55 York Blvd.).

From noon to 1 p.m., singer and queer activist Lyla Miklos and pianist Juanita Maldonado share music, stories and images to honour Two Spirit and LGBTQIA-plus communities. Visit events.hpl.ca for more.

Synonym Shop

Jazz Up Your Night at Synonym Shop (328 James St. N.) returns Friday.

One set plays from 7 to 8:15 p.m., followed by another from 8:45 to 10 p.m.

The free event starts right after Happy Hour on tap beer, from 4 to 6 p.m.

Mills Hardware

Lulu Lamontagne shares the stage with Sunshine Express, Hamilton-based The Checkerboards, and band Megasmegma on Wednesday Aug. 6. at Mills Hardware (95 King St. E.)

Advance tickets are \$15, plus tax and fees. Doors open at 7:30 p.m.

Mattmac and City Builders perform at the venue on Thursday, Aug. 7, at 8 p.m. Doors open at 7 p.m. Advance tickets are \$20, plus tax and fees. Go to millshardware.ca for tickets.

Slye Fox

Start off August at Slye Fox (4057 New St.) with John Restas on Friday Aug. 1 and Paul Mallard on Saturday Aug. 2, both at 8:30 p.m.

Brad Hailz returns to the Burlington venue on Thursday, Aug. 7 at 6 p.m.

All the performances are free to watch.

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