

“The Big Gig”: Summerfest’s Evolving Role in the City of Milwaukee

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Abstract

Summerfest has long been a staple to the city of Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin. The festival went through a lot to achieve to the high status it carries today. It all started, in 1962, when long-time Mayor Henry Maier wanted to bring an event to Milwaukee that would propel it out of the shadows of the Twin Cities and Chicago. Milwaukee has a long standing German heritage that played a huge role both the festival and city's founding. After years of planning, the festival was in doubt when race riots rocked the city the summer before its inaugural event, but the festival would proceed. Summerfest started out in several locations around the city to be accessible to many people, it was later moved to the lakefront. The festival is now the world's largest outdoor music festival. I want to tell the story of Summerfest as it changed to meet Milwaukee's needs. Readers should understand the festival's evolution from a cultural celebration, to a tool to cover-up the city's black eye after the riots of 1967, to something bigger in the years that followed. Readers should also understand the longevity of the event for Milwaukee. The festival celebrated its fortieth birthday during the summer of 2007.

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Go to Milwaukee!
How humming a city you'll see.
Sing in Milwaukee!
Trah, lah, lah, lah, lee.
Prosit Milwaukee!
Toast Gaily and so Free.
Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Milwaukee!
A happy place to be!

-The Summerfest Polka
Mayor Henry Maier, 1969¹

Introduction

The city of Milwaukee is nestled on the shores of Lake Michigan near the southeast corner of the state of Wisconsin. Milwaukee is known for a few distinct things: beer, bratwurst, and Summerfest. There is no coincidence that all of these things have a very distinct German theme that accompanies them. In 1839 Milwaukee received its first wave of German immigrants; this was to be one of many. The “Old Lutherans” made their way to what was known at this time as the Wisconsin Territory and the city of Milwaukee. Many more would come in the mid 19th century and help develop the growing city.²

Milwaukee, in many ways, is built on German culture. The Germans in Milwaukee settled together in the city. They developed a German Theater, German schools, newspapers, and fire companies.³ The city’s brewing tradition, not necessarily the top industry of the city, often drives the city’s image. Thanks to German brewing techniques, during the civil war, the people of Milwaukee did not have to pay for

¹ John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999.)

²Ibid., 59

³ David Goldfield and Blaine Brownell, *Urban America: From Downtown to No Town*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979). 155.

expensive beverages such as whisky and brandy.⁴ Breweries such as Miller, Pabst, and Schlitz contributed greatly to the Milwaukee economy from their founding.⁵ As recently as the 1990s Milwaukee was considered to be the most German top-tier city. At that time almost half of Milwaukee's residents claimed to have some German heritage. This beat out many other cities such as Cincinnati and St. Louis who were also considered "German-American capitals."⁶

In the early 1960s Milwaukee voted in a young democrat to replace long time socialist mayor Frank Zeidler. Milwaukee's new mayor, Henry Maier, had a vision for the city. He wanted to bring the city of Milwaukee out of the shadow of Chicago, Minneapolis, and St. Paul. After a trip to Germany, Maier announced an initiative to begin planning for a world festival. Maier wanted to bring in people from all over the world to celebrate the culture and beauty of the city.

That initiative would soon turn into Summerfest. Otherwise known as the "big gig," Summerfest developed into something special for the city and the state of Wisconsin. Many great acts play Summerfest every year, ranging from more modern John Mayer and The Red Hot Chili Peppers to classic bands such as Chicago and Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. The festival has been an ever-growing process for the city. How has it developed? What impact has it had on the city and its officials? Who played/participated at Summerfest? How has it evolved? These are all important questions to understand when one examines the festival. It is because of the festival's ability to evolve and meet the needs of the city that it holds its longevity.

⁴ Robert W. Wells, *This is Milwaukee*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970): 100.

⁵ Because of the whisky tax during the civil war, tavern patrons gladly switched to beer. This switch made Milwaukee beer famous and a staple for the city.

⁶Ibid.

Uniqueness of This Work

This essay discusses a great deal of political and social history of Milwaukee. It tells the story of Summerfest and the impact on social life in the city. The majority of the political history is told through the perspective of the mayor. Many, if not most, of the primary sources used in this paper are from Henry Maier's collection housed at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee archives. The part of the collection I used contained a wide variety of sources. These sources included, but are not limited to newspaper articles written about the development, progress, and events of the festival, minutes from Summerfest meetings, and administrative reviews of the festival. Using too many sources from Maier's collection would pose a problem, the full story of Summerfest could not be told. To combat this I tried to use newspaper articles from the two major publications in the city *The Milwaukee Journal* and *The Milwaukee Sentinel*. Even this was troublesome. Maier had a long standing feud with both newspapers, a topic to be focused on later in this paper.

A blend of social and political history used to tell the story of Summerfest makes this paper unique. Very little secondary material has been written on the festival. There seems to be an overall lack of secondary literature written on the city of Milwaukee in the last few decades as well. Most of this material only covers the festival in passing. In 2007 the first book devoted to Summerfest was published to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the festival. *Cooler by the Lake: 40 Years of Music and Memories* gave the musical history of the event more than anything. The author, a music critic for a Milwaukee newspaper, devoted most of his book to a chronological evaluation of the

music at the festival. This paper will tell the story of the festival from the very beginning until its move to the lakefront in the early 1970s.

Milwaukee World Festival

Henry Maier, considered to be one of the most prominent figures in Milwaukee politics, had a dream for his city. Maier served as mayor of Milwaukee who served from 1960-1988. John Gurda, Milwaukee historian noted that Maier served longer than any other big-city mayor in modern American History. Maier was born in Springfield, Ohio where he was raised by his grandparents. After a move to Milwaukee, he attended the University of Wisconsin. He first ran for mayor of Milwaukee in 1948; he finished a disappointing sixth in the primaries. Within a few years Maier won a state senate seat as a Democrat, a position he held for nearly a decade. He first took office of mayor in 1960 and would not leave until almost three decades later.⁷

In his second year as mayor, Maier started a plan for a world festival⁸ that would take place in Milwaukee. People from all over the country, as well as other international and ethnic cultural groups would be invited. The festival was to attract tens of thousands of people to what Maier called the city of *gemutlichkeit*, or the spirit of good will.⁹ Many attribute this idea after a visit to Germany's Oktoberfest. The mayor wanted to open the city to all people, not just those who dwelled within its limits. Maier originally suggested

⁷ Gurda, *Milwaukee*, 352.

⁸ Maier called it a "world festival" because he wanted to attract people from around the globe as well as promote world cultures. He also wanted his festival to rival those of Oktoberfest and Mardi Gras. The festival now, is considered to be the world's largest outdoor music festival.

⁹ Henry Maier, *The Man Who Made Milwaukee Famous: An Autobiography* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1993): 23.

a lakefront site for the proposed festival. Access would have been difficult because there was not a major traffic artery to and from the lakefront site.

Eight months after Maier's initial outline, he formed a blue-ribbon panel¹⁰ that evaluated the possibility of a world festival. The panel consisted of fifty members of Milwaukee's business, industrial, and civic leaders. Maier instructed this panel to "think big," and determine the impact on downtown businesses, restaurants, and industry. Not only was this festival created to improve economic opportunity in the city, but also to bring a stronger sense of community. Maier wanted the people of Milwaukee to pull "together for a common good." The common good would spill over into other aspects of day to day living. The city of Milwaukee needed something to jump start the downtown area that saw its fair share of white flight and lack of support for neighborhoods.

The newspapers noticed that it would take something special to get people into Milwaukee. One article said Milwaukee was not a place many tourists wanted to visit. They reminded Maier that any festival needed to keep true to the spirit of the city. In regards to the future events, the *Milwaukee Journal* said "they will have to be of such top notch quality that they make the nation sit up and take notice and *want* to come to Milwaukee."¹¹ At this point, many people in Milwaukee's administration, business sector, and print media wanted a festival that would be large enough, and meaningful enough to put Milwaukee in the national spotlight, as well as promote revitalization in the metro area.

¹⁰ Basically a blue-ribbon panel was the way mayor phrased a committee made up of prominent Milwaukee Citizens. As stated above they were professionals, civic leaders, and businessmen.

¹¹ "If We're to Have a Summer Festival, Let it Be Tops." As printed in the *Milwaukee Journal*. Box 181, Folder 11. Maier, Henry, W., 1918-1994. Papers, [ca. 1936]-1948, 1990. UWM Manuscript Collection 71. Archives. UWM Libraries. University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee

The port city of Milwaukee is known for its strong German heritage and strong brewing tradition. Maier wanted to celebrate this heritage in the world festival. Howard Meister, the chairman of the new planning committee, was sent to Berlin and Munich to evaluate their heritage festivals. He reported the many great things he saw. Meister was amazed at the vast size of each event. “Imagine beer halls holding 5,000 people with a band in the middle... They drink beer from 40 ounce pitchers and waitresses carry 15 pitchers without a tray.” Meister was quick to point out that it would be foolish of the city of Milwaukee to not exploit their brew making abilities; infact, it could be the center of attraction. Ultimately, those who traveled to Germany realized it was no use for Milwaukee to copy such events. The planning committee and Maier wanted something unique; something both German and American.¹²

An early estimate predicted the new festival might bring in seven million dollars to the community. That number was later raised to ten million dollars when the first festival drew closer. The first figure was contrived by estimating that one million people would attend each year. This rough estimate was guided by the notion that every patron would spend roughly seven dollars while they visited the festival. Food, souvenirs, amusement, and admission went into the average spending per-person. Lodging was left out of the estimate, but with thousands projected to come from outside the Milwaukee area, another quarter of a million dollars was expected for local hotels.¹³

¹² “‘Something Unique’ Asked for the Festival.” As printed in the *Milwaukee Journal*. Box 181, Folder 13. Also, in this paper there are two main newspapers used. The *Journal* and the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. The former was the morning paper of the city and the latter was distributed in the afternoon. They merged in 1995.

¹³ “Anticipate \$7,250,000 From World Festival.” As printed in the *Milwaukee Metro*. And “Big Returns Are Seen From World Festival.” As printed in the *Milwaukee Journal*. Box 181, Folder 11.

The world festival received a small boost with the success of “Day in Old Milwaukee.” Supported by the Jos. Schlitz Brewing Company, this event was a staple of Milwaukee’s long standing brewing tradition. This get-together featured a Fourth of July circus parade that hundreds of thousands of Milwaukee residents attended. The parade was installed in 1963 to honor Wisconsin’s own Ringling Brothers and other famous circus acts. A well behaved crowd and overwhelming support gave Maier hope for a world festival. “Let us build on what they (Schlitz Brewing Co.) have done and produce a festival which will rival anything offered anywhere in the world.”¹⁴ Maier was so impressed with the parade he asked the Schlitz Co. to market their parade as a main event for the world festival. Maier’s planners saw many possibilities for their world festival after studies in Seattle, Berlin and Munich, which hosted their own festivals. Maier’s idea survived the first year of planning, but there was still much to do to make Milwaukee’s festival top-notch.

A new planning committee assembled at the Wisconsin Club, in February 1963, to draw up a plan they could present to Maier. The committee, made up of professionals in the Milwaukee area, wanted to iron out the following questions: What attractions should be offered? Where should they be held? What is the estimated cost? What are the estimated benefits? The committee decided Milwaukee should use a mixture of old traditions and contemporary attractions, and should take place in a variety of location in the city. The lakefront, riverfront, civic center, and various park facilities were recommended to house acts. The committee wanted to get the festival, that could feature Milwaukee’s “melting pot” culture, up and running by 1966. The focus at this time was

¹⁴ “Maier Asks World Fest Push Here.” Newspaper unknown. Box 181, Folder 11.

quality. To do this correctly, Milwaukee needed to put together something with big acts that could impress viewers on the national and international level.¹⁵

The festival hit a turning point in the summer of 1965 when Maier turned over the planning to a fifteen member board of directors. Maier relinquished much of his control, but remained the project's chief supporter when he realized the festival was too big for one man's vision. In the same summer, the world festival committee received articles of incorporation; this gave the organization non-profit status. More simply put, the money, assets, and property gained from a world festival could not transfer to a private individual or corporate board member. Also, stock could not be traded in the company as it was a restriction for non-profit status.

The articles of incorporation indicated the first concrete purpose of the festival. Promotion of social-welfare through the medium of a festival within the Milwaukee metro area was the new main objective. The corporation said the festival would promote better awareness and educate Milwaukee's citizens of ethnic and cultural differences in the city. Milwaukee's administration recognized action was needed to promote cultural awareness. Milwaukee along with dozens of cities all over the country was immersed in the civil rights movement. The movement became violent for many cities in the mid 1960s. The World Festival Inc. was granted incorporated status just two months before a set of violent acts of repressed frustration struck Los Angeles in August of 1965 and spread through many cities across the country.¹⁶

The festival was on the right track at summer's end in 1965; the committee was granted incorporation, a board of directors was in place, and target date for the first full

¹⁵ "It's Brainstorming Today for Festival." Printed in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. Box 181, Folder 11.

¹⁶ Articles of Incorporation of Milwaukee World Festival, INC. Box 181, Folder 11.

blown event was set for 1969. It looked as if Milwaukee would have a festival to promote culture and ethnicity as well as draw thousands of tourists into the city. Conflict along race lines finally came to a climax in the summer of 1967.¹⁷ It looked as though Maier was ready for a festival, but many of Milwaukee's citizens had more pertinent worries.

Urban Unrest

Milwaukee city became more and more segregated as the inner-city's neighborhoods shifted culturally. The first neighborhood shift brought African-Americans just after WWI. The Great Migration brought millions of southern blacks to northern cities at this time. Cities like Milwaukee recruited blacks to work in the growing industrial centers of the urban center. The black population boomed between 1910 and 1930. More than 7,500 African-Americans dwelled in the city by 1930, this made up approximately 1.3% of the population, compared to 980 African-American citizens in 1910.¹⁸

The years leading up to 1960 saw a good deal of urban flight by those who could afford to leave. Maier said nearly 25% of middle-income families left the city in the 1950s. This number is equivalent to the gain in suburban population. The shift continued into the 1960s when the inner-city saw a dramatic change in population. The advent of the automobile and improved roadways aided suburb growth. Better roadways and new

¹⁷ "Milwaukee: We're Off to a World Festival; Let's Make It [sic] Outstanding One." Printed in *Milwaukee Journal*. Box 181, Folder 11.

¹⁸ Gurda, *Milwaukee*, 257-258.

expressways made it easier for individuals, especially middle class whites, to live in the suburbs and have access to the city.¹⁹

When people moved out, a new group of people had to move in. In 1960 blacks accounted for only 8.2 percent of the inner-city population. In a matter of ten years that number exploded to 82 percent. Blacks took over what used to be European immigrant housing. By this time, though, much of the infrastructure was weak and unattractive. Ghettos developed and inner-city life failed many. African-Americans struggled to make a subsistence wage in the city of Milwaukee while they fought for civil rights and equality.²⁰

Finally repressed frustration gave way to riots. In regard to the riots, Maier said “the crisis of the central city is no longer a ‘creeping crisis.’ It is a fact of life in this summer of 1967.”²¹ The conflict, which built up a great deal of steam in the previous months, came to its climax on the night of July 30th, 1967, one year away from the Milwaukee World Festival. Riots broke out in the streets of the inner-city ghettos. Looting, arson, and armed violence all took place at great lengths.

On the night of the riots, it took only a matter of minutes for the mayor to be pulled out of bed and into city hall.²² After Maier arrived at city hall his first item of business was a request for the National Guard to be put on standby if the civil disputes got out of hand. To do this Maier contacted Wisconsin’s governor, Warren P. Knowles, who held the ultimate power to disperse the National Guard. What put the mayor over

¹⁹ Ibid., 335-339.

²⁰ Ibid., 319-320.

²¹ Henry Maier, “Proclamation of State of Emergency, July 31, 1967.” Box 43, Folder 20.

²² The mayor was informed of the riot at 11:43 pm, he arrived at city hall less than a half hour after this notification at 12:10am.

the edge was the report that two police officers had been shot. In response to the shootings, at almost 2:30am, Maier declared a state of emergency.

Maier put a curfew over the city, to try and stop the initial riot. Many administrative advisors asked the mayor to lift the curfew, but Maier was hesitant to do so for a few reasons. He deemed it easier for police to control the situation if people were confined to their homes. The mayor also wanted those people who depended on the central city to realize its importance to their lives. More specifically, Maier wanted individuals who lived in the suburbs and commuted to the city to see how their lives were affected when they could not access the resources of the city or their place of employment, with the end goal of greater support for the metropolitan cause.²³

The city became calmer as the time passed after the initial Sunday, July 30th outburst. Fewer and fewer arrests were made. On the sixth day of the state of emergency the mayor, along with the Interdenominational Ministerial alliance, an organization of black churchmen, delivered a thirty-nine point list of objectives for the revitalization of the city. Finally on August 9, 1967, the tenth day of the state of emergency, the mayor lifted the curfew for good. The people of Milwaukee went through a great deal and needed to see improvements as soon as possible.

The thirty-nine point action plan played a huge role in how Milwaukee was improved and revitalized. Many of the points dealt directly with equal opportunity and access for African-Americans. For example, the first of thirty-nine points urged “the mayor to initiate ways and means to increase Negro employment.” Also along these lines, the mayor appointed a black assistant to the Mayor’s office. The most important points, for this paper, were those that dealt with the beautification of Milwaukee.

²³ Maier, *Famous*, 70.

Milwaukee was one of the many cities that faced violent uprisings. Large cities such as Detroit, Chicago and Newark all faced the harsh realities of civil unrest, however many of these cities were hit with significant more damage to life and property. Milwaukee suffered only three deaths and about 100 individuals injured in the summer riots of 1967. Cities such as Chicago and Newark often saw two or three dozen casualties and millions of dollars in property damage; in Detroit more than forty people died.²⁴

Restoring the Image

Summerfest²⁵ was just one idea, of the many, to restore the city to its high stature. Maier needed the festival now more than ever. It was an opportunity for Milwaukee to show the world their good will and friendship and try to erase what he called the image of a city with a “clenched fist.”²⁶ Maier used the administration’s newly formed beautification committee to promote the city’s appeal. The committee was installed from the thirty-nine point plan to evaluate ways to spruce up the city. This included the construction of artwork and fountains, planning of social events, and an effort to revive abandoned buildings and neglected store fronts.

The Beautification Committee, in a matter of only two years, erected over seventy fountains, both in and outdoors, in an effort to promote Milwaukee’s new image as the city of music and fountains. The committee built fountains and performed other tasks

²⁴ Ibid., 371.

²⁵ This is the first real mention of the name “Summerfest” in the analysis section. The name changed from a generic world festival title to Summerfest a few months before the 1968 festival. Other names purposed by “interested citizens” included: Milwaukee Fest, July Fun Fest, Midsummer-Milwaukee, Juli Uni-Spass, and my favorite Funtasia. Box 180, Folder 2.

²⁶“Summerfest: A Chronicle of Success” Box 181, Folder 12.

with private funds raised through various fundraisers as well as monies from the city.²⁷ The mayor strongly believed the importance of fountains to the image of the city, “In an age of much urban ugliness, fountains could help Milwaukee become that ideal city in which men and women can feed the hunger of the spirit for beauty.”²⁸ Milwaukee’s beautification committee was so successful it was awarded the National Twiggs trophy for its achievement in inner-city development.²⁹

Maier’s administration was not only worried about beautification, but they looked to promote culture and the arts as well. The push for cultural advancement included the development and construction of a new Performing Arts Center (PAC) to host the many ensembles of the city. The PAC was not just a concert hall but also a war memorial. The final cost of the project reached twelve million dollars, with the help of government funds and nine million dollars in private donations, the PAC was built.³⁰ Even as a memorial, the new PAC did not sit well with many people. In a time where poverty was a pressing issue, Milwaukee’s administration decided to focus on a center that was mainly accessible to the middle and upper-class. The black-tie, opening night, celebration attracted over 600 protesters upset with the arrogance held by Milwaukee’s elite.³¹

Planning went well for the World Festival in the months leading up to the riots. In April of 1967, the executive committee established several sub-committees responsible for different events the festival would host. This is really the first time potential events or areas of interest were specifically proposed for further investigation. Those who served

²⁷ Henry Maier, “Remarks at the ‘City of Music and Fountains’ Meeting, September 12, 1967. Box 171, Folder 1.

²⁸ “Maier’s Remarks at Fountain Dedication,” September 18, 1969, Box 167, Folder 25.

²⁹ This national award was given to cities deemed the cleanest and most involved in urban revitalization around the country.

³⁰ Wisconsin Architect “Performing Arts Center,” November 1969. Box 167, Folder 25.

³¹ Gurda, *Milwaukee*, 398-399

on the board and subsequent committees were prominent citizens of Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin. These people worked at the local television stations, were presidents of large companies, and included the Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi as a board member.³² The executive board had a good idea what they wanted at the first festival, and the sub-committees created mirrored them. For example, one committee was responsible for the inclusion of jazz music, while another committee was set up to secure all festival sites.³³

In a matter of two months the festival really started to take shape. It was an exciting time for the World Festival Committee. Festival events went from dreams and ideas to realities. Tentatively scheduled for the 1968 festival were events such as the Jaycee International Air Show, an international auto race, and a two-night concert titled “Music Under the Stars.” Even with some events set in stone, there were dozens of ideas still yet to be investigated. Among these were an international cook-off, a teen event, and a National Folk Festival.³⁴

The Milwaukee World Festival had several goals it hoped to achieve in its founding. Printed in a brochure to lure potential sponsors, were seven objectives for the festival, they were:

- Establish a broader tourist industry in Wisconsin.
- Focus national attention on Milwaukee, its people and its products.
- Fortify the area’s cultural heritage.
- Induce repeated visits by travelers.
- Put the city’s redevelopment and beautification program on display.
- Provide fun and excitement for Wisconsin residents.

³² Vince Lombardi served as the general manager of the Green Bay Packers at this time, but was known for coaching the team to two Super Bowl victories. Other notable board members: Ben Marcus (President of Marcus Theatres), Robert Uihlein (President of Jos. Schlitz Brewing Co.) and James Windham (President of the Pabst Brewing Co.).

³³ Milwaukee World Festival “Operational Flow Chart.” Box 180, Folder 1.

³⁴ Milwaukee World Festival. “Proposed Events.” June 14, 1967. Box 180, Folder 1.

-Bring ten million dollars into the community.³⁵

These goals were extremely important to make the festival a good one. After the rioting and chaos in the summer of 1967 the festival took on a new goal, maybe the most important one: restore the image of Milwaukee to its natives and to the rest of the world.

The rest of 1967 and into the early months of 1968 were difficult for the committee. Did the planning committee want to go on with the festival after what happened in July and early August? Maier saw an opportunity to use the festival as a tool to promote the city of Milwaukee in this tumultuous time. With the governor on his side, a go-ahead was given to the executive board to continue planning without a significant change in events. There were, however special events planned to promote awareness of the city's black community. Maier said the Milwaukee that happened in the summer of 1967 wasn't the good-natured Milwaukee everyone knew. Of interesting note, in the same public statement, Maier joked about the dismal situation in Milwaukee when he suggested that the open housing demonstrations could be used as an event for tourists who attended.

There were many concerns that musicians and performers would not make their scheduled trip to the city of Milwaukee because of personal safety fears. In November of 1967 recording companies reportedly were hesitant to send out their jazz musicians to Summerfest because of the rioting that occurred a few months back. The committee differed on their opinions about how the riots affected the festival. Many of Milwaukee's festival officials remained strong in their opinion. One quoted official said, "If they (jazz

³⁵ Milwaukee World Festival Inc., "World Festival Brochure" Box 180, Folder 1.

artists) don't want to come to Milwaukee, we don't want them."³⁶ With this, Summerfest's planning committee stood by the notion of putting the best product one stage. They did not want to include anyone who was not fully committed to this project and the city of Milwaukee.

Not only did the first festival encounter a difficult time booking certain guests, a festival this size also brought a hefty price tag. Many events were thousands of dollars to bring in the performers and then cost more to stage the actual production. The city of Milwaukee could in no way afford to fund the entire festival. \$125,000 was furnished by the State of Wisconsin, Milwaukee County, and the city of Milwaukee. This money only covered the administration fees such as salaries, planning, and some promotion. Milwaukee needed to find a way to cover the costs of the actual events and performers.³⁷

The Milwaukee World Festival Inc. installed an umbrella plan to fund various events and make them cheap for patrons. Under this plan, individual groups, institutions and private firms were encouraged to "buy" an event.³⁸ When a company bought an event they took responsibility for coordinating and promoting the event as they saw fit.³⁹ The only criteria given: keep the event in tune with the overarching festival movement. The officials of Summerfest urged buyers to promote state-wide in order to draw tourists. One good example of solid promotion was done by the Blatz Brewing Company, who sponsored the National Polka Festival. They were able to combine promotion for their beer, as well as promotion for the event they sponsored.⁴⁰

³⁶ "Artists' Fear of Race Strife Here Denied," as printed in the *Milwaukee Journal*. Box 181, Folder 13

³⁷ "Milwaukee World Festival Background," Box 180, Folder 2.

³⁸ Sponsors for the first festival included: Blatz Beer, Milwaukee Journal, Evinrude Motors, The Boston Store, and many others.

³⁹ "Milwaukee World Festival" Box 180, Folder 2.

⁴⁰ "Summerfest 68 Progress Report," Box 180, Folder 2.

For Those Who Cannot Afford Golf Clubs and Summer Homes⁴¹

The Summerfest of 1968 intended to give all people of the city, no matter their social or economic place, a chance to experience a “kaleidoscope” of new events and cultures. In fact, the events were spread throughout the city and only amounted to an average of a few per day during the nine day festival. The brochure for the inaugural event does not publish prices, but they are listed in the 1969 brochure to give one an idea of how the first summer went. Many of the events, especially music concerts and venues by the lake, were free of charge. Generally the cost of an event did not exceed two dollars, making it feasible for most people and families to attend events.⁴²

The location of the events made it accessible to many. The completion of the Marquette interchange in April, a major highway junction a few blocks from downtown, made the events accessible from the suburbs and beyond. But with a central location on the neighboring blocks of Wisconsin Ave, what some might consider the main street in downtown Milwaukee, access was easy for those who lived in the inner-city. Attractions such as the National Ballet of Mexico and the National Folk Festival were held in the central city. Because these events were placed in the central city area, The Milwaukee World Festival promoted the importance of embracing and celebrating culture in the downtown area.

In conjuncture with the mayor’s goal to promote the African-American culture, many events featured black performers. The Music Under the Stars concert series held in Washington Park, featured many “famous Negro entertainers from many parts of the

⁴¹ This was the subtitle for a chapter devoted to Summerfest in Maier’s autobiography.

⁴² Ibid., and Milwaukee World Festival Inc., “Summerfest 1969,” Box 180, Folder 2.

country.”⁴³ Included in this were Miriam Makeba and band leader Hugh Masekela. Makeba was a South African singer who traveled the country fairly extensively. A highlight stop in the States for Makeba included a trip to Washington D.C. where she sang at John F. Kennedy’s birthday party, in the 1960s. She at one time, was married to the famed civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael.⁴⁴ By the time the 1968 festival came around, Hugh Masekela was a well known band leader from Johannesburg. He played all around the United States, and globe, after he went into exile in 1961. The *Milwaukee Journal* described the performance by Masekela and Makeba as worthy of remembrance. The performers were proud to promote their heritage while on stage. Milwaukee brought in some big names in African-American music for Summerfest ‘68. This shows good effort on their parts to incorporate African-American music into the festival. Both of these performers were well accomplished musicians before their stop, and only improved their status as the years went on.

The group “Up with People!” had a three day stint during the first festival. “Up with People!” was a group of racially mixed student-aged individuals. They traveled the country promoting positive values of humanity. The group drew thousands of people to each of their performances at County Stadium and Washington Park. “Up with People!” inspired a resolution unanimously passed by the city council that praised the group for its contribution to the first festival.⁴⁵

Not all events were held in the central city, events were held on the Wisconsin State Fair ground were the Miller “200” excited race fans. Also, Milwaukee County

⁴³ 1968 Brochure.

⁴⁴ Janet Planet, “Miriam Makeba,” accessed at <<http://www.africanmusic.org/artists/makeba.html>> 2 Novemebr, 2007. Carmichael was a leader in the civil rights movement. He was a prominent figure in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and later a leader in the Black Panther party.

⁴⁵ Richard Vonier, “Showers May Sneak Into Summerfest Acts.” Box 181, Folder 13.

Stadium hosted a soccer game between two internationally recognized teams .⁴⁶ In an effort to attract youths to Summerfest, a small “youth fest” found a place on the lakefront. There was a great deal of discussion in the Maier camp about educating young students about the problems of oppression and the need for harmony among cultures. Events like youth fest tried to mix kids in a social setting. For an admission price of \$1, teenagers were given the opportunity to dance, listen to rock and roll music, and play carnival type games on the midway.⁴⁷

Maier’s Struggles

Many politicians are criticized for their programs. As Milwaukee’s mayor, Maier was not always portrayed as favorable person in the city’s print media. At the time Milwaukee had two main newspapers, *The Milwaukee Journal* and *The Milwaukee Sentinel*. Maier thought the newspapers in the city gave him unfair criticism for Summerfest, and would kill the event if given the chance. In Maier’s autobiography, he professed frustration with the local media when the paper wrote on the first Summerfest, “The whole affair conspicuously lacks a theme to give it distinction, identity, staying power...”⁴⁸

In one particular speech the mayor expressed his frustration with those who purposely tried to harm his idea. The festival went through rigorous study and testing, possibly more than any other project implemented by the mayor. In Maier’s eyes people continued to doubt the festival. “It (Summerfest) has attracted more than its fair share of scoffing, jealousy, and just plain obstructionism.” Maier saw a line that was crossed

⁴⁶ “Summerfest ’68 Map” Box 180, Folder 2.

⁴⁷ 1968 *Brouchure*

⁴⁸ As printed in: Maier, *Milwaukee*, 24.

between putting the festival through rigorous evaluation and what he called “negativism”.⁴⁹ Even with the setbacks, the mayor was determined to let the world see a broader and brighter Milwaukee.

The event, to really get a solid foundation, needed to be backed by a media source Milwaukee citizens accessed everyday. The Summerfest planning committee experienced the most frustration when coverage of the second year festival, arguably the most crucial year in the evaluation process, lacked print space in the papers. The number of pages devoted to Summerfest by both newspapers decreased dramatically. According to one committee member’s report, the *Sentinel*’s coverage decreased by about half from the first to the second year, while the *Journal*’s coverage decreased by about forty percent.⁵⁰ The lack of coverage of Summerfest ‘69 by the two main newspapers in Milwaukee was linked to the large debt amounted the second festival incurred. The executive board determined the neglect of the print media, who profited a good deal by running ads in their respective papers, hurt the Summerfest dream.

The festival took a big hit when the festival secretary, George Watts, resigned from his position eight months before the 1968 inaugural festival. Outraged by the lack of leadership shown by Maier, Watts left the planning committee. Watts felt the festival should be canceled until Milwaukee had reason to celebrate. “Obviously, unless these problems are resolved, we not only won’t be able to have a world festival, we won’t be able to enjoy our city ourselves.”

Watts realized that the festival would push the true problems under the rug. He went on and said Maier was generally a good mayor but had a “blind spot” on the issue of

⁴⁹ WEMP, “Mayor Maier Reports,” Box 171, Folder 4.

⁵⁰ Maier, *Milwaukee*, 25-27.

civil rights and open housing. Maier did not respond to these comments directly, but other members of the planning committee made the assertion that the civil rights matter would be straightened out, and the festival was needed more than ever.⁵¹

Ironically, the first African-American on the board for Summerfest was the replacement for Watts. Bennie Graham, a fourth grade teacher, took over the remainder of the term vacated by Watts. Graham wanted to give the scheduled African-American events what he called a “punch.” The event that was carried out brought in some very big name black musicians.⁵² It took six years from the initial planning date to have an African-American in a top festival position. If Watts did not object for reasons along race lines, blacks may not have received representation.

In a note from the Executive Director to the Economic Director, suggested sites for Maier to attend were listed numerically for each day. Generally these sites made the mayor the most visible to the cameras and to the patrons. The “Negro Musical and Cultural Show” was not listed as a top priority for July 20th, 1967, but was listed for the Mayor’s consideration. Milwaukee’s Civic Plaza, located in the heart of downtown, hosted the show. The show was scheduled at 8pm that evening, the same time slot as the National Polka Festival and the Youthfest.⁵³ The polka party turned out to be one of the most popular events, it drew many patrons away from the black music festival.

⁵¹ “Festival Official Quits, Blasts Maier on Rights,” As printed in the *Milwaukee Journal*. Box 181, Folder 11.

⁵² “World Festival Gets Business Manager.” As printed in the *Milwaukee Journal*. Box 181, Folder 13.

⁵³ Edward Ball, “Memo to Kenneth Fry: June 25, 1968.” Box 180, Folder 2.

Success at the Fest

Amidst all of the trials the festival faced during its first year in operation, it was a successful event in many ways. Many of the local newspapers displayed headlines to support this. Some of them read “Summerfest 68 Receives Bravos, Cries of Encore,” or “Summer Festival Hailed as Success.” At the surface of the event, Milwaukee’s melting pot of cultures were proudly displayed, local businesses saw action due to increased tourism, and the praise outnumbered the complaints held by the people. It was the good relationship between the government and the private sector that allowed for such a great event.

From Maier’s point of view Summerfest was a smashing success and had the potential to be Milwaukee’s greatest economic achievement,⁵⁴ although the festival did not gain as much money as it hoped in the first year. The executive board planned for a surplus of \$25,000, but the actual amount fell short of that. The festival did have a good deal of economic impact on the city as 1,250,000 million people attended the event.

More people attended Summerfest in the first year of operation than any year after. Many of the patrons in attendance were the same Milwaukee natives who lived the race riots one summer ago. One may think that with its national and arguably global fame, the number in attendance should be greater in 2007 than it was in 1968. Not only is the festival now more famous, but it is also easier for travelers to access since it moved to the lakefront in the early 1970. With the precedent Summerfest 1968 set, the executive board saw an opportunity mold the festival.

With over a million people in attendance the first year Maier succeeded in meeting point number three of the thirty-nine points, which described a need to increase

⁵⁴ Maier, *Milwaukee*, 25

park and recreational facilities.⁵⁵ The most recent festival, held in 2007, which is now two days longer, attracted almost 900,000 people⁵⁶, still a large number, but lacking compared to the inaugural event. The idea that Summerfest in its first year attracted so many is a great tribute to Maier and his goal of revitalizing Milwaukee.

One of the main goals set by the original executive board for the festival said it was the utmost importance for Summerfest to keep people coming back. They really wanted people of the late '60s to remember the fun they had in Milwaukee and not dwell on race riots or the conflict in Vietnam. There are many stories of people who attend Summerfest every chance they get.⁵⁷ "I've been to at least 25 Summerfests, including almost daily visits as a music writer. Like many native Milwaukeeans, the festival is part of my seasonal mindscape."⁵⁸

The Summerfest website, for its fortieth birthday allowed people to write about their memories of Summerfest's past. Countless number of people said they go to Milwaukee for the fest every year. One patron writes, "Summerfest has been part of every one of my summers since I was a teenager in the late '70s...Where else can you get such a great variety of music, food, people..."⁵⁹ Thousands of Wisconsinites feel the same way when they make the trek to Milwaukee for "The Big Gig." The good willed nature of the festival, and the returning festival goers, keeps Maier's dream alive.

When the first festival was over Edward Ball said something interesting. Ball wanted the fest to lean "toward more events like the National Ballet of Mexico and

⁵⁵ Maier, *Milwaukee*, 82.

⁵⁶ "Summerfest 2007 Grows Revenue and Exceeds Expectations," 13 July, 2007 accessed at <http://www.summerfest.com/index.html>.

⁵⁷ Of my 22 years, I have been to Summerfest about 10-12 times.

⁵⁸ Tianen, *Cooler by the Lake*, 6.

⁵⁹ Debbie Schweikl, "Smile on Summerfest" part of a blog of "Summerfest Memories." Accessed at <<http://www.summerfest.com/index.html>> October 9, 2007.

slightly less emphasis on circus acts.”⁶⁰ Summerfest would certainly change, but not in the classical sense. The ballet and polka at the first festival soon evolved into break dancing and Rock and Roll.

Summerfest Rolls On...

The 1969 version of Summerfest was significantly bigger than the inaugural event. The event coordinators kept several of the successful events the same from the previous year in hopes the events would be the anchor of the festival. The air show at General Mitchell Field was largely successful again, nearly a half-million people attended. Polka music remained in the spot light as well. Legendary comedian Bob Hope headlined an event at Summerfest '69. The festival remained a local affair. Ninety percent of patrons lived within a 500-600 mile radius of Milwaukee. This was no surprise, almost all of the advertising was done at the local and regional levels.⁶¹ It would be a few years before Summerfest expanded its advertising, thus bringing in more tourists.

The big story to come out of Summerfest '69 was not any of the acts, but the large debt incurred. Over \$150,000 left the executive committee and many of the citizens of Milwaukee wondering what happened. Such a debt put serious doubts on the possibility of a 1970 Summerfest. Of course, the planners of the festival were quick to place the blame elsewhere; the newsprint media became the number one target. Edward Ball took direct aim at Milwaukee's newspapers in a memo sent to the President of Milwaukee World Festival. Ball said, "It is my opinion that our 1969 Summerfest would have been

⁶⁰ Gerald Hinkley, "Summerfest a Hit; 1969 Encore Seen," As printed in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. Box 181, Folder 11.

⁶¹ Mary Ann Jung, "Summerfest Mixes Home-Grown and Imported Talents." Box 180, Folder 3.

more successful...if the Sentinel and Journal would have given us at least the same amount of coverage that they did in 1968.”⁶²

In a graphic attached to the memo, Summerfest coverage dropped nearly forty percent from 1968 to 1969.⁶³ The lack of newspaper coverage was not the only reason the festival saw red figures. Money expected from the State of Wisconsin never materialized, this left \$40,000 out budgets for Summerfest '69 and '70. Summerfest officials tried selling buttons for patron to redeem for reduced admission came up significantly short of the expected amount. Button sales were projected at \$35,000, but the actual figure was a dismal \$7,800. The largest factor of debt was the lack of patrons who attended events that carried an admission charge. Estimations put figures for paid attendance at \$136,000. The actual amount of revenue was \$43,000 for a revenue decline of \$93,000. Adverse weather played a huge role when it turned many patrons away caused final day of Summerfest to be cancelled. Estimates said Summerfest lost approximately \$40,000 because of the poor weather during the festival.⁶⁴

The planners of Summerfest remained hopeful. Many other festivals went into severe debt before a profit was made. For example, the New York World's Fair in a matter of two years, lost \$40 million dollars. Even Wisconsin's own State Fair incurred debt for its first 85 years of operation. The State Fair was renewed every year because the state felt it served a good purpose.⁶⁵ Maybe Summerfest caught an unlucky break in 1969, or simply hit a “sophomore slump.” It is here the festival takes a turn that would alter its image forever. The planning committee realized it planned too many events in

⁶² Edward Ball, “Memo to Howard Meister.” Box 180, Folder 3.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “State of Summerfest Finances.” Box 181, Folder 14.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

too many places. Simply put, the crowds were too spread out. What Summerfest needed was a central location to house all of the events.

Summerfest Goes to the Beach

After the poor financial performance by the '69 festival, Summerfest was ready to move to a central location. The lakefront in Milwaukee is something that was, and still is, celebrated by its citizens. Sharing a border with Lake Michigan, the lakefront is a beautiful place for recreation. The first move to the lake came when the Milwaukee World Festival, Inc. requested a \$1 a year lease with the city for administrative offices. Previously the area was used as a NIKE missile base. This move made it possible for almost all of the Summerfest events to move to the 15 acre lakefront site. If the festival was to be a “permanent attraction, it needed a permanent site.”⁶⁶

Summerfest truly became permanent in 1970. The festival secured a central location to house all of the attractions. This made it easier for patrons to have access to all events, rather than a sporadic assortment. A new logo for the festival brought permanence as well. Developed by Noel Spangler, the artist used a smiley-face to represent the sense of humor and fun that the festival was all about. The logo, with its original intent in mind, is still used to day to promote the festival. It quickly became the image of the Summerfest tradition.⁶⁷

Already in its third year the theme and events of Summerfest looked noticeably different. Popular music made its way onto the stages. Sly and the Family Stone, a racially and gender mixed group, played to a large crowd. The Family Stone, a headliner

⁶⁶ “Great Festival.” As printed in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. Box 181, Folder 11.

⁶⁷ Harry Hedberg, “Logo Memo.” Box 180, Folder 5.

at the Woodstock music festival, hit the festival with a new sound that mixed jazz, rock, soul, and pop. Also, a main stage act was the band Chicago. At the time Chicago had two albums out and two top 10 singles with “25 or 6 to 4” and “Make me Smile.”⁶⁸ These concerts brought in an estimated 30,000-50,000 patrons. Summerfest continued to roll on. Over a million in attendance, and a profit of \$161,000 ensured a ’71 engagement.

The festivals of the early 1970s continued to grow. Huge names in entertainment graced the amphitheater stage on the Summerfest grounds. In 1971, groups such as the Jackson-Five, Blood, Sweat & Tears, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry contributed their music to the festival. Summerfest continued to give people several options when they went to the lakefront. The Folk Festival, one of the more popular events of the inaugural event, still drew a large crowd. Polka music still found a place to celebrate Milwaukee’s heritage.⁶⁹

The change in the nature of events was profound. Big names brought in big money and higher ticket prices. The Milwaukee Youth International Party (MYIP) took notice. They pushed flyers on the street that described exploitation because of paid admission. “Summerfest is the ultimate expression of honkey kulture’s [sic.] attitude toward us, EXPLOITATION. This year they’re selling our music back to us.”⁷⁰ Mayor Maier made it no secret he wanted to capitalize on the tourism the festival drew. To combat the inability of some to get to the festival, there was an effort to get free tickets

⁶⁸ “Chicago History,” Found at < <http://www.chicagotheband.com/history.htm>> accessed on 8 November 2007

⁶⁹ “Summerfest ’71 Brouchure.” Box 180, Folder 8

⁷⁰ Milwaukee Youth international Party, “Bigger than Woodstock?” Box 180, Folder 8.

out to the community. Tickets were donated by festival sponsors to several churches for parishioners who were unable to afford the admission price of \$1.50.⁷¹

The Summerfest of 1972's schedule was bigger than the festivals before it. Guests such as Aretha Franklin, David Cassidy and B.B. King headlined the main stage. While at the '72 Summerfest, one such entertainer altered his career and rocked the festival. George Carlin was a comedian who played often on late show television. He was fairly popular at this time and often made appearances on the Johnny Carson Show. On July 21 Carlin took the main stage and went into his bit about "The Seven Words You Can't Say on Television." Carlin was promptly arrested after his show and charged with disorderly conduct. The *Milwaukee Journal* printed Carlin in handcuffs on the front cover of the July 22nd issue. He used the publicity to rename the act to "The Milwaukee Seven." One historian calls 1972 "the year the Summerfest smile got its mouth washed out with soap."⁷²

The original goal of the festival set a bench mark of one million patrons. The 1968 festival, devised as an unfinished version, would grow with each year and allow for more people to see and experience the city. The festivals to follow it, generally ones held after 1970 saw a shrinking crowd. Crowds dropped over twenty percent in the years after the move to the lakefront.⁷³ Maier said from the early stages of planning, this festival would evolve. It certainly did change as the city of Milwaukee needed it to, but the move to the lake limited access for many. This change is not for the better of the city of Milwaukee. With the move to the lake Summerfest lost much of its original focus. It

⁷¹ Robert Welch, "Donated Ticket Memo." Box 180, Folder 8

⁷² Tianen, *Cooler by the Lake*, 27.

⁷³ It is of worth to note the estimates taken before turnstiles were not always reliable. Estimates of early festival attendance were taken by police or reporters.

also became more of a variety show. It no longer was the “polka party,” but a large event that tried to draw in as many interests as possible.

The Summerfest Legacy

It all started as a way to celebrate Milwaukee’s heritage and later used as a tool to cover up the black eye in the 1960s, Summerfest grew into an amazing spectacle.

Nestled nicely on the shore of Lake Michigan, the event has turned into the “World’s Largest Outdoor Musical Festival.” It is because of Henry Maier’s dream the event turned into what it is today. Because of his hard work and vision, the lakeshore grounds were named after the long-time mayor and dubbed Maier Festival Park. The summer of 2007 marked the fortieth birthday; certainly a great celebration for an event that was on the verge of extinction after its second year of operation. This fortieth birthday brought 890,000 patrons through the gates over the eleven days of Summerfest.⁷⁴

Not only did Summerfest bring a unique flair of Milwaukee’s desire to promote culture, but new festivals were born from its success. A few years after Summerfest made its permanent home on the lakefront, many ethnic groups in the city of Milwaukee created their own festivals to celebrate life and culture. In 1978, some of Milwaukee’s Italian families banded together on the lakefront to remember the loss of their church. This festival, named Festa Italiana, paved the way for other heritages to do the same. Along with Festa Italiana came German Fest, Irish Fest, African World Festival, and Mexican Fiesta, all held on the Summerfest grounds.⁷⁵ These festivals have grown to be largely popular with the respective cultures as well as outsiders. Specifically in the case

⁷⁴ “Revenue Exceeds Expectations,” <http://www.summerfest.com/index.html>.

⁷⁵ Other festivals not listed above: Polish Fest, Indian Summer, Asian Moon, Arabian Fest, and Pride Fest.

of Irish Fest and for others, these events have become the world's largest showcase of that culture.⁷⁶ With the boom of all of these new events on the lake, Milwaukee truly evolved into the city of festivals.

⁷⁶ Gurda, *Milwaukee*, 403-404.

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