

Los Angeles Times

BY AUGUST BROWN



L.A. HAS A NEW JAZZ MEGA-FEST, FROM A FORMER CITY COUNCILMAN

One question has bothered Martin Ludlow in his decades as a concert and event promoter in Los Angeles. In a city packed with excellent jazz musicians, and a century of history with the genre, why is there no local equivalent of the massive festivals that cities like Montreal, New Orleans or Montreux, Switzerland, have built? One where the music transforms clubs, restaurants and parks across the city for nights on end?

This summer's inaugural LA Jazz Festival in August will be the biggest push in a generation to build that here. Ludlow's event – which melds his passion for jazz with the logistics muscle of his former life as a city councilman and labor leader – hopes to draw 250,000 fans across the city for a month of concerts culminating in a stadium-sized show on Dockweiler Beach. It will be one of the largest such events in the world, and the biggest Black-owned fest of its kind.

"This festival is intended to lift up our ancestors that came to this country in bondage, terrorized, brutalized," Ludlow said outside City Hall on Wednesday. "It's also about celebrating the end to those last bastions of Jim Crow racism, the days we were denied access to public drinking fountains, public swimming pools and public beaches. From the beginning of this journey, we've been very intentional about telling the narrative of that human rights struggle called Jazz."

Flanked by Mayor Karen Bass, City Council members Heather Hutt, Traci Park and Tim McOsker, and jazz figures including Ray Charles Jr. and Pete Escovedo, Ludlow promised a galvanizing occasion for L.A.'s local jazz scene and the city's wobbly tourism economy. That jazz scene has welcomed new investments like Blue Note L.A., and lamented beloved clubs like ETA closing.

This festival, however, hopes to be more on a scale with forthcoming mega-events such as the World Cup and the Olympics. The 25-day event in August will sprawl all over the region, with free park concerts in all 15 council districts, and 150 late-night shows at clubs and restaurants across the city. A Caribbean street fair highlighting the African and Latin roots of jazz will hit El Segundo, along with guided tours of historic Black coastal sites like Bruce's Beach and Inkwell Beach.

The fest culminates in a two-day concert on Dockweiler Beach that hopes to draw 40,000 fans a night. While a lineup is still in progress, the scope of Ludlow's ambition is formidable –

"This is the Los Angeles that will welcome the world. One of the best things we have to offer is all of our culture."

Los Angeles Times

– the fest will ban fossil fuels from its footprint, and earned a strong vouch from the California Coastal Commission. For decades, the Playboy Jazz Festival (now the Hollywood Bowl Jazz Festival) was the defining event for the music in Los Angeles; this could eclipse it several times over.

“Martin, I’ve been on this 15-year journey with you. Through all of the ups and downs, I’m so excited this is the year,” Mayor Bass said at Wednesday’s event at City Hall debuting the festival. “This is the Los Angeles that will welcome the world. One of the best things we have to offer is all of our culture.”

Ludlow is a colorful figure in Los Angeles politics – He’s delved deep into community activism and embarked on a successful third act as a concert and event promoter, throwing socially-conscious events with his firm Bridge Street, which has produced shows for Stevie Wonder, The Revolution, Sheila E and Snoop Dogg along with civic events like the ceremony renaming Obama Boulevard in Los Angeles.

“During this journey, you can only imagine there’s a lot of highs and a lot of lows,” Ludlow said. “When you have those lows, you want a friend that really can lift you up.” He had plenty of them onstage with him Wednesday announcing what could be a new flagship event for jazz in Los Angeles.