

George T. Wein
October 3, 1925 – September 13, 2021

Impresario, promoter, pianist, art collector and philanthropist George T. Wein, co-founder and creator of the Newport Jazz Festival® and the Newport Folk Festival®, who for seven decades, was the most influential presenter of music around the globe, died peacefully in his sleep on Monday, September 13, 2021. He was 95.

When Wein received a Grammy® Honorary Trustee Award in 2015, the awards show host, rap star/actor LL Cool J, said, “George Wein defined what a music festival could be with the Newport Jazz Festival, Newport Folk Festival and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. This is a great guy. More than anyone, George set the stage for what great festivals today look like; festivals like Coachella, Bonnaroo ... he made this possible...”

Known more as a producer than a performer, Wein made stars of, and revived the careers of generations of musicians who performed at his venues. Miles Davis, who told Wein that “you can’t have a festival without me,” performed his comeback in 1955 with his immortal performance of *Round Midnight*. The following year, Duke Ellington said he was “born at Newport” when he recorded one of his biggest hits, *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*. Wein created the music festival as we know it, putting jazz and folk and their many variations in the most accessible performance spaces to the widest audiences possible.

Just before his 90th birthday, Wein began planning for the sustainability of Newport Festivals Foundation, the non-profit that runs the two music events. First he tapped producer Jay Sweet, who had brought new life into the Folk Festival, to work as Executive Producer to oversee the organization with the board of directors. Then he set his sights on bassist Christian McBride, who, unrivaled, became Artistic Director of the Newport Jazz Festival in 2017.

“He not only invented the idea of a modern-day music festival and made the careers of numerous music icons, but his investment in music appreciation is to me what makes him the biggest icon of them all,” said Sweet. “George has an undeniable gift for making things happen. As a result, he has perhaps done more to preserve jazz than any other individual. He was my mentor and, more importantly, my friend and I will miss him dearly.”

Upon the announcement of his new role, McBride said, “To be able to work with a legend like George Wein, not only as a musician, but now as an understudy, is a task I will cherish and approach with openness and excitement.” He told *Elmore* magazine in 2019, “He’s still the source and guiding light for every person who runs a major festival.”

Even now, that sentiment continues to be echoed by producers in France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and all across North America.

In his 2003 biography, *Myself Among Others: A Life in Music*, with Nate Chinen, Wein wrote, “whether it’s one of the many festival producers throughout the world, or the concert promoters, or the individual nightclub owners struggling night to night – their contributions are essential to the history of this music. I’m glad to have been part of this process: in the development of the jazz festival, the acceptance of this music as art, the efforts to bring jazz to a wider audience worldwide ...”

George Theodore Wein was born in Newton, MA, on, October 3, 1925, to Jewish parents. His father, Dr. Barnet Wein, was an ear, nose, and throat specialist. His mother, Ruth, was a homemaker, and he had an older brother, Lawrence. He started taking piano lessons at the age of eight. He was later introduced to

Earl Hines' horn-like piano style and the die was cast for his life in jazz and music. Wein played in various jazz bands around Boston while still in Newton High School. After a year in college, he was drafted into the Army. He maintained that he got his greatest education and life lessons from negotiating with fellow soldiers of many races, ages and faiths. Following his honorable discharge from the Army, he returned to Boston University on the G.I. Bill and graduated from the School of Liberal Arts in 1950.

After college, 25-year old Wein opened his own jazz club, Storyville, in Boston, which featured world-renowned stars and emerging artists. He created a record label of the same name, recording some of the best in live music. But, he would undergo the biggest opportunity and challenge of his life in 1954, when he met Newport socialites, Louis and Elaine Lorillard, who asked him to create something to liven up summers in the City-by-the-Sea. A fan of the classical music festival in Tanglewood, Wein began to formulate his plan.

He wrote in his memoir, "What was a festival to me? I had no rule book to go by. I knew it had to be something unique, that no jazz fan had ever been exposed to. I remembered my nights in New York City when I had started off in Greenwich Village at 8 pm, gone to Harlem, and ended up seven hours later at 52nd Street. I could never get enough jazz. I heard Dixieland, big bands, swing, unique singers, and modern jazz. If this is what I loved, then that's what should appeal to any jazz fan. I'm sure that's what directed my concept of the Newport Jazz Festival ... They wanted to 'do something with jazz' in their community. I took that vague but earnest request and hatched the festival. There is no doubt that the driving force and inspiration behind the festival was Elaine ... Louis provided the necessary financial support and local influence." Wein did the rest and made music history many times over.

From that moment on, the Newport Jazz Festival was the gold standard for presenting jazz to the public. To list all of the jazz artists who played there would be exhausting. Simply put, all of the major and emerging stars have performed there, and 67 years later, they still do. Thelonious Monk, Dave Brubeck, Lester Young, Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughan, Count Basie, Frank Sinatra, Mahalia Jackson, Tony Bennett, Chick Corea as well as Herbie Hancock, Wynton Marsalis, Jon Batiste, Robert Glasper, Cécile McLorin Salvant, Snarky Puppy, Diana Krall, Christian McBride and countless others have been a part of the festival's storied history.

In 1959, the same year Wein married Joyce Alexander, an African-American biochemist, he co-founded the Newport Folk Festival with folk artist Pete Seeger. They later hired producer Bob Jones, and went on to present the best and brightest musicians of folk, blues, and gospel, including Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul & Mary and the Dixie Hummingbirds. Today artists have included Mavis Staples, Brandi Carlile, Jim James, Nathaniel Rateliff, Michael Kiwanuka, Dolly Parton, Rhiannon Giddens, The Decemberists, Jason Isbell, Alabama Shakes and the late John Prine. It was on a Newport Folk stage in 1965 that Dylan famously (infamously to some) went electric. Wein, who sensed the displeasure of the audience, asked Dylan to go back on stage and play some acoustic selections. He did as requested, and the set became known as one of the defining moments in 20th Century music. After turning over the reigns of the Folk Festival to producer Sweet in 2009, Wein attended every event (except 2021), listening to old favorites and new music while marveling at the sold-out crowds and enjoying the many surprise artist collaborations.

The decades from the 60s to the 90s saw Wein's operation, Festival Productions, expand. In 1970, he founded the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, which he later turned over to his protégé Quint Davis. In 1972, one year after the Newport riots, Wein came to New York City, and produced concerts in the summer months when Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall were traditionally closed. Wein's Newport Jazz Festival-New York, along with his afternoon concerts and workshops breathed new life into the Big Apple jazz scene, which was diminished at that time.

Three years later, Wein and promoter Dino Santangelo launched the KOOL Jazz Festivals, which featured jazz, R&B and soul artists on the same stages in large arenas across the country, including Oakland, Atlanta, Hampton, VA, Cincinnati, San Diego, Houston and Kansas City. Jazz superstars McCoy Tyner, Freddie Hubbard, Quincy Jones, Donald Byrd and Cannonball Adderley played on the same bill with the Ohio Players, the O'Jays, The Isley Brothers and B.B. King. Those concerts became more than just music events – they were annual celebrations of Black music that were revered as major cultural events.

In 1984, he negotiated a sponsorship with JVC, which lasted in New York for 25 years. Wein's company circled the globe with events in Newport, Los Angeles, Chicago, Warsaw, Copenhagen, Berlin, Tokyo and Paris, among others, bringing top-flight American jazz overseas and opening up the world to touring jazz musicians. His influence also made it possible for many international artists to work in the United States.

Wein pioneered the idea of sponsor association with music events, and during those periods of changing public taste in music and society, he engaged with many sponsors including *Essence*, for which in 1995 he and the magazine's co-founder, Ed Lewis, developed the annual music festival that became the largest African-American culture and music event in the United States. Wein also built sponsorships with Mellon Bank, Ben & Jerry's, Verizon and *Playboy*, which bred a 42-year working relationship and friendship with producer Darlene Chan.

In 2007, Wein sold his company to a group of young entrepreneurs, who within two years ran into financial trouble. To keep his legacy alive, Wein, then 81, reacquired the festival names and remained active with them until his death. In 2009, he aptly titled his flagship events George Wein's Newport Jazz Festival 55 and George Wein's Newport Folk Festival 50, funding both events with his own money and funds from a few friends. The following year, he established and was named Chairman of the non-profit Newport Festivals Foundation. Shortly after announcing that he was looking for a sponsor for Newport Jazz, the Foundation landed the healthcare company Carefusion and then Natixis Investment Managers as presenting partners.

In addition to its festivals, the Foundation began sending its Jazz Assembly Band into schools to celebrate the rich history of jazz. Since its inception in 2016, the program, spearheaded by Deborah Ross, Education Director and Wein's Operations Manager for over three decades, has given access to more than 35,000 students. Particularly excited by this initiative, Wein fondly remembered an elementary school assembly, which featured a jazz band that played "Rhapsody in Blue." He called it "an experience he would never forget." Newport Festivals Foundation also provides instruments to schools, free content for music educators, financial relief to hundreds of musicians impacted by the pandemic and presented over 100 grants for music education programs across the country.

In 2020, the pandemic forced Newport and other festivals around the world to cancel and go virtual. Wein was no fan of virtual concerts and was looking forward to returning to his beloved Newport to ride around Fort Adams on his golf cart, The Wein Machine, sampling a taste of all the music on every stage. That was not to be, but Wein was thrilled to take part in the festival from his Manhattan home where he introduced his friend Mavis Staples over the telephone and singer Andra Day (star of *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*) via FaceTime.

A life-long student of Black culture, Wein and his wife, who died in 2005, created The George and Joyce Wein Collection of African-American Art, which went on display at Boston University in 2019. The collection contained 60 works from a host of artists including Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Norman Lewis, Beauford Delaney and Jacob Lawrence. The Joyce and George Wein Foundation contributes to a

number of organizations, including The Studio Museum in Harlem, which administers the annual \$50,000 Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize, one of the most significant awards given to individual artists in the United States today. The award recognizes and honors African-American artists who demonstrate great innovation, promise and creativity. The Foundation also established The Joyce and George Wein Chair of African American Studies at Boston University and the Alexander Family Endowed Scholarship Fund at Simmons College. The Foundation also supports Dr. Glory's Youth Theater, a *multi-ethnic non-profit children's theater* that presents original works by Dr. Glory Van Scott twice a year.

As a result of his diverse contributions to jazz and world culture, Wein was honored by heads of state, educational institutions and leading publications. In addition to the Grammy Award, he was named an NEA Jazz Master (Jazz Advocate) in 2005, and in 2012, he received the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP) Award of Merit for Achievement in Performing Arts for an individual "whose genius, energy and excellence has defined or redefined an art form." In addition, honors and awards were bestowed upon him by Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, AARP, The Studio Museum in Harlem, the French Legion d'Honneur and Chile's Order of Bernardo O'Higgins. Wein was the recipient of honorary degrees from Boston University, the Berklee College of Music, Salve Regina University, Rhode Island College of Music and North Carolina Central University. He was a lifetime Honorary Trustee of Carnegie Hall and on the board of The Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation.

In 2014, the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation opened the George and Joyce Wein Jazz & Heritage Center, an education and community facility that offers free music classes in the city's Tremé section. He said it gave him great pleasure "to drive down North Rampart Street to see their names across the top of a building in a city where Joyce was not welcome in the first meetings to discuss the festival in New Orleans."

Though he slowed down in later years, Wein was still active not only in Newport, but before the pandemic, he enjoyed going to jazz clubs several nights a week, sharing gourmet dinners with friends, collecting and sampling wines from around the world and playing piano and singing for guests at his Eastside home. As a pianist, he recorded over 10 records, including *Wein, Women and Song*, *George Wein and the Newport All-Stars*, and *Swing That Music*. He made his last public performance in 2019 in Newport at a pre-festival concert and he presented his band, the Newport All-Stars, at the 2010 and 2012 jazz festivals.

"The mark of a great business leader is to be able to take an idea and build it into something memorable, something wonderful for the world to enjoy," said Bruce Gordon, who was President of Verizon Retail Markets when he first met Wein 20 years ago and now succeeds him as Chairman of Newport Festivals Foundation. "As a young man of just 25, George listened to a dream, created an idea and built a team to help nurture it. It also takes someone very special like George to know that, while your mind is still sharp, you can handpick the people to carry on your legacy. To be able to live long enough to watch it flourish is an added blessing. But, most importantly, George was not just a business colleague, he was friend and family to me and my wife, Tawana, to the entire board and to the team of people with whom he surrounded himself, many who had worked with him for multiple decades. To say that we loved him and will miss him is an understatement."

The Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals are Wein's greatest endeavors, but his true legacy is that he proved that jazz and folk music can be presented to the public with quality and dignity beyond the clichéd confines of nightclubs and coffeehouses and brought into the light of day, where everyone can mingle and swing in harmony. And, he also proved that one can have a good life from doing exactly what you love. As he told National Public Radio in 2014, "Jazz will go where musicians take it, because they'll always want to play. And, as long as they want to play, somebody's going to listen."

George Wein is survived by his nieces Margie Wein of Brooklyn, NY, and Carol Wein of Watertown, MA; sister-in-law Theodora McLaurin of Chestnut Hill, MA; and long-time friend, Dr. Glory Van Scott of New York City. George and Joyce had no biological children, but he loved and nurtured dozens of festival “children and grandchildren” around the world.

Funeral and memorial services will be announced at a later date.

It was George’s wish that any memorial tributes be made in the form of charitable donations to Newport Festivals Foundation, the 501 (c)(3) non-profit corporation he established in 2010 to preserve the Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals. Donations can be made at www.newportfestivals.org/george or by mail at Newport Festivals Foundation, PO Box 650, Essex, MA 01929.

#