

MUSIC FESTIVALS PROVIDE ECONOMIC BOOST

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“Danny + Joy” performs on during the Under the Big Sky music festival in July at Big Mountain Ranch east of Whitefish. (Daniel McKay/Whitefish Pilot file)

In July, roughly 30,000 people over two days crowded within the boundaries of Big Mountain Ranch to attend the first-ever Under the Big Sky festival, which attracted big-name artists like Nathaniel Rateliff & the Night Sweats and Band of Horses.

Under the Big Sky festival is already confirmed for another summer, and the newly introduced Songwriter Festival is set to bring more music to Whitefish in September 2020.

Pair those with Festival Amadeus, the Whitefish Theater Co. and Alpine Theater Co. lineups and more, and Whitefish is beginning to look like a music destination.

Visitors have already been coming to Montana for these events, though in small numbers so far.

According to research by the University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, approximately 10% of visitors who came to Montana for at least a night in 2018 came for a festival or event during their trip.

And for local business owners, there was a noticeable bump resulting from Under the Big Sky in an already-busy time of the summer.

Whitefish Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Kevin Gartland said he heard nearly all positive reactions from locals and business owners after the festival had wrapped up.

"I think overall the reaction we had from folks was very positive. They were excited about having that type of event in our area, not just for visitors, but for locals too," Gartland said. "It certainly spiked occupancy for four or five days and probably longer than that. Summer already is a busy time for us, and it seems they brought in quite a few new visitors that filled hotels and campsites and other types of lodging."

Gartland says he also sees the event as "putting Whitefish on the map."

Veteran event producer Johnny Shockey created the Under the Big Sky festival held at his ranch near Whitefish off Voerman Road. The festival just announced its 2020 lineup, which features bands like Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit, Tyler Childers and the Head and the Heart. The festival will run on July 18 and 19 this summer.

While Whitefish has had a concert series in the past, like at Whitefish Mountain Resort and Festival Amadeus, the classical music festival that runs for a week in August, the big names brought in by Under the Big Sky is new.

"I think it does a lot for our area in terms of just putting us on the map. For folks visiting, their first time might be for the event but then they might come back at other times of the year and I think that's the real benefit to something like this," Gartland said. "I think it's all about the setting. People enjoy getting out of their element, and certainly the music festival scene has blossomed over the last 15 to 20 years, to where music is a reason for people to go on vacation. When they look where to do that, mountain towns are always a popular destination."

The Whitefish Songwriter Festival this fall announced plans for its event to run Sept. 17-19, 2020. The festival will feature more than 20 songwriters in 30-plus shows spread out around downtown shops and restaurants.

The Whitefish festival is a production of Rocky Mountain Songwriter Festivals Inc., a nonprofit that began with the original Red Lodge Songwriter Festival with the goal of promoting music education.

The songwriters, who are expected from Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Alberta, Nashville and more, are set to perform their songs and tell stories of how their music came to be at venues around Whitefish.

The festival is also partly supported by the Explore Whitefish grant program, which provides funds to local nonprofit organizations and Whitefish Convention and Visitors Bureau business members that bring events and programs to Whitefish's shoulder seasons.

Gartland said the Songwriter Festival is another side of the same coin, being a far more local and intimate celebration of music, but a festival nonetheless.

"It's a completely different bird. It's an offseason event, rather than a massive stage for 7,500 people to watch a major headline act," he said. "It's more of a grassroots type of festival. They'll be utilizing our existing nightclubs and venues for a more intimate experience. It has a lot of potential."

The timing of the Songwriter Festival is desirable, Whitefish Convention and Visitors Bureau Executive Director Dylan Boyle said.

"Increased live music is certainly a benefit for both residents and visitors alike," Boyle said. "With that said, it's all about timing."

Boyle said he was happy to see the big turnout for Under the Big Sky, but so far WCVB does not promote summer visitation or events since Whitefish is typically considered already at capacity for visitors during the summer anyway.

Instead, holding events like the Songwriter festival during the shoulder season is more beneficial.

"We have been and continue to be focused on highly targeted marketing for shoulder season visitation to those who appreciate our unique sense of place and want to experience our vibrant small town just as us as residents do," Boyle said. "That is why we choose to live in Whitefish. And part of that is live music."

For more information on the Under the Big Sky Festival, visit www.underthebigskyfest.com/ (<https://www.underthebigskyfest.com/>).

For more information on the Whitefish Song Writers Festival, visit whitefishsongwriterfestival.org/ (<https://whitefishsongwriterfestival.org/>).