


Musicians, venues across the region to take part in Thursday's Make Music Day

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Gigs are a musician's lifeblood. Sure, recording and releasing songs for public consumption and (hopefully) adulation is a good thing. But most any player will tell you that climbing onstage and performing in front of a live crowd is an almost impossible-to-replicate experience — in large part because the audience is an active participant and the shared electricity and energy betwixt both parties is magical.

In that spirit, Thursday's 35th annual Make Music Day provides a live soundtrack for the entire world. It's an international celebration in which musicians of all ages, skill levels and genres perform free in an equally wide-ranging array of venues from clubs and concert halls to storefronts, churches, libraries, sidewalks, restaurants and anywhere people might gather — all with the hopes of providing a melodic sense of community.

And, as officially orchestrated by the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, Make Music Day will provide plenty of participation here in our region. In Baltic, New London, Old Lyme, Mystic, Norwich, Groton, North Franklin, North Stonington and Waterford, musicians and/or citizen will lift voices in song, as originally envisioned when the event was conveyed by France's Ministry of Culture in 1982. The idea has spread in wondrous fashion and, last year, representatives from the Connecticut Office of the Arts met in Hartford with regional arts organizations from across the state to initiate Nutmegger participation.

In southeastern Connecticut, that translates at press time to at least 60 performers at more than 35 venues — and those figures are still climbing. Wendy Bury, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, remembers the original Office of the Arts meeting and the Harford reps saying their goal was to have 100 performances.

"So I said, half-jokingly and half-seriously, 'Well, then, we're going to aim for 101 performances in southeastern Connecticut.' I walked out thinking we'd actually be happy with 10 performances since it was our first time doing something like this. But we had a lofty goal, we're good at what we do, and that's how we roll. Arts and culture bring this region together and we shine when there is an opportunity," she says.

Many of the artists will be familiar to area music fans; others are casual or amateur musicians. Some will play in venues associated with live music; others in unlikely but intriguing spots. In New London, for example, shows will happen in Daddy Jack's, the Hygienic Art Park, Telegraph Records, the Social, the Garde Arts Center, 33 Golden Street, Hot Rod Café, and on the Parade Plaza and Waterfront Park — all of which regularly host live music.

But look for performances, too, at Fiddleheads Food Coop, Flavours of Life, the New London Hospitality Center, the Custom House Maritime Museum, Colby Park at The Day, R86 Space, Right Path Organic Café, Writer's Block, Inc., and Spindrift Guitars. Likewise, in representative fashion, folks can see and hear music at Sprague River Park in Baltic; libraries in Groton, North Stonington and North Franklin; Reliance Health Gallery in Norwich; the Gazebo on the Civic Triangle in Waterford; Mystic Knotwork in Mystic; Riverfront Children's Center in Groton; Bill Memorial Library and Groton Public Library in Groton; and in many, many more places. For a complete list of performances across the region, access makemusicday.org/southeasternct.

More than just a gig

"Make Music Day not only connects our players with the local community, it engages them in the idea that we are a global community," Chris and Amy Leigh, founders and proprietors of New London's String Theory School of Music, say in a joint email. Chris is a longtime professional guitarist/instructor active in many well-known area blues and jazz groups, and Amy is a career teacher and educator. String Theory offers instruction in theory, performance and the business of music to students of all ages and achievement, and many of the students and instructors will be participating on Make Music Day.

Chris Leigh and String Theory instructor/bassist James Hunter play at noon in New London's Right Path Organic Cafe, while, at the school, the String Theory Acoustic Ensemble entertains at 5:30 p.m. and percussion instructor Miguel Rios conducts a 7:30 p.m. drum circle.

The Leighs add, "Music is a language that can pull at the heartstrings of people from vastly different circumstances, resulting in the kind of emotional response that's unique to the arts."

It's a similar philosophy at Old Lyme's Nightingale Acoustic Café, a live music venue that also serves as the home for the MusicNow Foundation, an organization that nurtures young musicians in a variety of performance and songwriting workshops and classes. Touring acoustic blues guitarist/songwriter Dan Stevens and his wife, Gail Stevens, who runs the Nightingale's Café and oversees the music program, also feel Make Music is a more-than-worthy event and concept.

"You know, we'd heard a few months ago Make Music Day was happening in our area, and it's so great," Dan Stevens says by phone from a tour stop in Pennsylvania last week. He performs Thursday at 5:30 p.m. on Lyme Street as part of Music for Make Music Day — Old Lyme, then at 8 p.m. in the Tap Room of Westerly's Knickerbocker Music Center. "This event is not only right up the alley of our mission at Nightingale's, but it's nice to see this part of the state getting involved because we have so many talented young people in this area. This helps them see the bigger picture of music in very important ways."

Nightingale's/MusicNow performers participating as part of the 5-7 p.m. celebration on Lyme Street are Ukulele at the Teen Hot with the Saxy Saxaphones and More (steps of the First Congregational Church); Sophia Griswold & Connected (Old Lyme Ice Cream Shoppe); Sophie Spaner & Chris Gregor (Lyme Services Bureau); Drew Cathcart & Forever Fool (Old Lyme Town Hall); Eric Simon-Vourite (Old Lyme PGN Library); Ceci (Pat Spratt Designs); and an all-inclusive finale on the terrace of the Old Lyme Inn.

Make Music Day obviously represents the opportunity for area working musicians to perform, and there's the totally fair context that any gig is presumably a good gig regardless of whether it's part of an international happening. But the energy and heart of the event offers a bit of a different context, particularly for some of the local musicians who'll play more than once on Make Music Day.

Songwriter Anna May, for instance, will do four sets in four different locations: at 11 a.m. at Foundry 66 in Norwich; at 1:30 p.m. in New London's Homeless Hospitality Center; at 5 p.m. in Writer's Block Ink in New London; and at 8 p.m. in Norwich's Yantic River Inn.

"It's important in the music world that we all value each other and leave space to learn from one another. Listening is maybe more important than playing is," May says. "Many musicians unconsciously stay contained and somewhat segregated in bars and coffee shops, and we tend to get stuck and stagnant in our various circles. This is such a cool idea and set up with so many different venues involved. I'm looking forward to playing the Homeless Hospitality Center, for example, and engaging in something that feels wide open. Something that promotes peace and healing. That, after all, is the intention of music."

Relative newcomers Jacob Wysoski and Laura Lynne Stetler, who perform together as the string duo Patina, are also looking at Make Music Day as an opportunity to expand their horizons and experiences in the spirit of the event. They'll play three different shows, at 1 p.m. in the Flavours of Life Fair Trade Store in New London; at 3 p.m. in the Custom House Maritime Museum, New London; and at 5:30 p.m. at the Bill Memorial Library in Groton.

"We love that Make Music Day is a global event that is animated locally, and we wanted to be apart of the inaugural celebration in southeastern Connecticut," Wysoski says. "Our goal was to fit in as many performances as possible for the day, and we're honored that a shop, a museum and a library expressed interest when we reached out. Curating live music in public places of all kinds immediately resonated with us — plus making a ruckus in a library has always been on our bucket list."

If the long-honored stereotype of the quiet library seems a bit out of character to take part in Make Music Day, Jennifer Miele, manager of library public services in Groton, says this event is a happy coincidence in that the summer reading theme for Groton libraries this year is "Libraries Rock."

"We heard about the Make Music event from the Southeastern Cultural Coalition newsletter," she says. "Since we are conducting many music-related programs for all ages this summer, participating in this was an obvious choice."

It in fact looks as though participation and turnout for Make Music Day in this region will exceed expectation. But Bury is quick to suggest the enthusiasm has a great deal more to do with people in general than efforts by bureaucratic or civic groups. She credits longtime New London music activists Rich Martin and Barbara Neff for their efforts, as well as volunteer Jane Loeser Clukay — all of whom cross-coordinated booking and scheduling.

"The Cultural Coalition is not meant to be in the spotlight," Bury says, "we ARE the spotlight ... There are two things in this world that unfailingly bring people together, and those are food and music. Bring on Make Music Day!"

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If you go

What: Make Music Day, an international celebration where musicians and fans of every skill level, in a huge variety of venues, gather together in song for purposes of unity and joy

Who: Over 60 southeastern Connecticut artists will take part as part of the state's first official participation in Make Music Day

Where: Throughout the region

For more information: www.makemusicday.org/southeasternct
(<http://www.makemusicday.org/southeasternct>)