

Singin' in the rain: Damp weather couldn't derail Make Music Day in New London



BUY PHOTO

Brad Bensko of Boston performs Friday, June 21, 2019, at the Custom House Maritime Museum in New London during Make Music Day. The performance was one of several taking place through the day in New London and other towns in the area. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

Published June 21, 2019 5:35PM

By **Rick Koster** (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=r.koster) Day staff writer

✉ r.koster@theday.com (mailto:r.koster@theday.com) [🐦 rickkoster](https://www.twitter.com/rickkoster)
(<http://www.twitter.com/rickkoster>)

There are worse ways to get wet than wandering the streets of downtown New London on a rainy afternoon, stopping by a succession of live music events taking place in a variety of venues across the city.

That's how it was Friday, as southeastern Connecticut helped celebrate the state's second annual Make Music Day. Over 115 acts were scheduled to perform across the region, and many artists — veteran players and not-so-veteran — cheerfully persisted despite steady precipitation of various intensity throughout the day.

"I've got a song about rain, but I don't think I'll play it," said New London songwriter/poet Brian Gore. He was — yes, standing in the rain — outside the Garde Arts Center, waiting on his upcoming set and watching as the duo Hugh (Birdsall) & Dana (Takaki) were performing under the theater's marquee. Gore admitted he was not aware of Make Music Day until recently, when he was invited to take part in the event. "I probably should have known about it, but now I do and I'm glad. It's a pretty magical thing."

Indeed, the whole idea of Make Music Day, a global celebration that started in France 36 years ago, is that anyone and everyone should have a day to join in and play and/or listen to music.

In that spirit, as Hugh & Dana moved into their violin/acoustic guitar rendition of the Elvis-associated "Can't Help Falling in Love," Jessica Mancuso — who'd sang at The Garde earlier as part of Jess & Amy — joined in to alternate or harmonize on vocal lines with Birdsall.

"That's why this is so great!" Takaki exclaimed after the song. "That was just a really happy accident." Takaki said she and Birdsall, who were finishing the second of five scheduled gigs for Make Music Day, similarly had surprised the East Lyme Senior Guitar Group by helping out on that act's early set at Fiddlehead's Food Co-Op. "We just said, 'Can we play?' Takaki explained, "and it worked really well. I think they were surprised, but were clearly happy to let us join in."

And the rain kept falling.

"Well, maybe Mother Nature's not cooperating, but (Make Music Day) is still going on and people are having fun," said Philip Michalowski, watching from the Garde steps. "It's what I'd expect of New London. There's so much musical talent in this town and it keeps growing and it enriches our lives here."

On Bank Street, as the lunch crowd wound down at the Right Path Organic Cafe, fluidly melodic jazz flowed, seemingly a soundtrack to the weather, from the Leigh-Hunter Duo. Stepping out of the kitchen, chef/owner Robert Bernardo paused to watch guitarist Chris Leigh and bassist James Hunter with appreciation.

"The first music we had here was a year ago on Make Music Day — and it was Chris and James," Bernardo said. "I love music and I love supporting musicians, but, truthfully, our restaurant doesn't serve alcohol. That makes it tough to hire bands because selling drinks is a big part of affording live music. But they played this event a year ago and I thought, 'I've got to do this more often.' They're so good and I want people to hear and appreciate good music, and maybe associate it with their experience here."

A full day's line-up of bands was scheduled for the Whale Tail Stage on Parade Plaza. But by mid-afternoon, the onstage gear, though set up, was still under tarps. Under the small tent protecting the mixing board, soundman Travis Zuidema, studying a weather forecast on his cellphone, huddled with members of funk trio Monch as they tried to decide what to do.

"I mean, we could just go for it," said drummer Tim Donnell. "With rain and electric equipment, what could go wrong?" He was, of course, joking. Eventually, the rain slowed to a drizzle and Monch was able to carry on with their set.

The weather wasn't a problem inside the main exhibit room at the Custom House Maritime Museum, where the classical music trio Playa Players transfixed a fine afternoon crowd. The musicians, sharing historical anecdotes about the pieces, composers and instruments, were a perfect example of the variety of musical styles being represented for the event.

"We decided to participate last year, at the first (Make Music Day), and we had a group of young boys with angelic voices come and sing in the morning," museum Director Susan Tamulevich said. "We don't open till noon, so we weren't sure what to expect. But we had a lot of people show up and it was magical from the start. So we definitely wanted to do it again this year. It's terrific to be part of it and maybe present slightly different music than you'd find elsewhere. And that's part of the idea."

Back at the Whale Tail Stage, as blues harmonica player Blunt White prepared to conduct harmonica lessons for anyone interested — and was passing out free harmonicas to facilitate the process — onlooker Don Diederich was happy. "I think it's stopped raining," he said, "which is great because there's outdoor music scheduled with bands on into the night. I've been looking forward to it."

He also was pleased — and maybe a little nervous — because he'd just been invited to sit in and sing with a group later in the afternoon. Diederich explained he's been taking vocal lessons at String Theory Music School, and that one of his instructors, Jessica Mancuso, had run into him a few minutes earlier and asked him to come onstage later and do a song.

Informed that Mancuso herself had spontaneously sat-in with Hugh & Dana just a few hours before, he said, "Well, there you go. That's what this is all about, right?"

r.koster@theday.com (mailto:r.koster@theday.com)

STORIES THAT MAY INTEREST YOU



My Pet Pal: Cutie and Archie (/local-news/20190701/my-pet-pal-cutie-and-archie)

Cutie and Archie love to chew on things, keeping their family up at night.



Friends and Neighbors: High Hopes appoints new trustees, board chair (/local-news/20190701/friends-and-neighbors-high-hopes-appoints-new-trustees-board-chair)

Jacqueline Kangley was recently named the chair of the board of trustees for High Hopes Therapeutic Riding in Old Lyme. Sarah Kitchings Keenan and Margaret "Mac" Mummert have also been named as trustees for a three-year term.

Waterford High School Quarter 4 Honor Roll (/local-news/20190701/waterford-high-school-quarter-4-honor-roll)

Waterford High School Quarter 4 Honor Roll

Spring 2019 area dean's list (/local-news/20190701/spring-2019-area-deans-list)

The following local students have made the dean's/president's list at their respective schools.