



The Village Sun

REAL NEWS FOR THE COMMUNITY

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From left, Liz Thomson, David Milch, Nancy Notaro and Cliff Pearson. (The Village Trip)

Equal parts fun and crazy: A behind-the-scenes look at creating The Village Trip 2023

SEPTEMBER 19, 2023

BY CLIFF PEARSON | People often ask us, “When do you start planning next year’s Village Trip?” We usually reply, “The day after the current festival closes.” But this year, the answer is a little different, since we actually got things going on the first day of TVT22. That’s when we

met David Milch and Nancy Notaro, who live in the East Village and happened to attend our opening day block party on Eighth Street. Spotting a slender, white-haired musician on an outdoor stage at Eighth and MacDougal, Milch turned to Notaro and said, “That looks like David Amram. But that’s impossible. Amram was best friends with Jack Kerouac in the ’50s and worked with Leonard Bernstein and Joseph Papp in the ’60s, so he would have to be 90 years old or something.” But it WAS David Amram and he was going strong at age 92, playing penny whistles and piano, scat singing and leading a lively group of musicians, including Kevin Twigg, Jerome Harris, Rene Hart, Jim Seeley, Lee Falco, Renee Manning, Antoinette Montague, Adam Amram and David Keyes.

A physician by training, Milch has invented medical devices, invested in the life-sciences industry, produced films on Holocaust issues, and runs a charitable foundation. He and Notaro love music, the arts and making a difference. They immediately fell for The Village Trip and said they would help. They provided us with a very generous matching grant and, more important, they helped us with the organizational infrastructure that we had been lacking. In the year since we met David and Nancy, they have guided us as we applied for and received recognition from the IRS as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, put together a proper board of directors and a board of advisers, and set our organizational house in order. They have also provided help connecting us with all kinds of talented and creative people — from theater producers and musicians to key players in city government. They happen to be incredibly fun people to hang with, too. Lucky us!





David Amram recently playing at the Eighth Street Block Party at the start of The Village Trip. (Photo by Cristina Arrigoni)

The people we attracted to our new boards offer a remarkable range of skills and backgrounds. On our board of directors we have David and Nancy, as well as musician William Anderson, who directs our Classical and New Music program; pianist Joan Forsyth; behind-the-scenes power broker and all-around-wonderful person Jane Crotty; former City Councilmember Alan Jay Gerson; Judy Paul, who owns the Washington Square Hotel and has supported The Village Trip from the very beginning; and Robert Snyder, Manhattan Borough historian and professor emeritus at Rutgers University.

On our board of advisers, we have another impressive group of individuals: David Amram, “the renaissance man of American music;” author and filmmaker Jamie Bernstein; educator Amy Blake; community activist and Latin music expert Pepe Flores; filmmaker Michael Jacobsohn; folklorist Elena Martinez, who is co-artistic director of the Bronx Music Heritage Center; journalist and author Ira Mayer; composer and music critic Carman Moore; Father Graeme Napier, rector of St. John’s in the Village; author and events management executive Kevin O’Keefe; lawyer and photographer Maria Passannante-Derr; Lyn Pentecost, media director of La Sala de Pepe y Foto Espacio; eight-time Grammy nominee and Latin jazz bandleader Bobby Sanabria; singer Janis Siegel of The Manhattan Transfer, a 10-time Grammy-winner; Dorothy Slater, community liaison at New York University’s Office of Community Engagement; Erika Sumner, vice president of the Washington Square Association; and Doug Yeager, music manager and co-producer of the film “Free to Rock.”

In the fall of 2022, after the end of last year’s festival, we started brainstorming ideas for TVT23 with everyone on our boards. Liz noticed that the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington would be at the end of August 2023, so we talked about making music and civil rights a major theme for the festival, something that could weave through the program in a variety of ways — as concerts, panel discussions, lectures and tours. We knew we wouldn’t be able to do everything we’d like, but we kept bringing up the topic with organizations and people we wanted to work with. For example, Professor Snyder, who gave last year’s inaugural Village Trip Lecture at the Jefferson Market Library, suggested a few people as candidates to give this year’s lecture. Ultimately, we approached historian Eric K. Washington, who won the Herbert H. Lehman Prize for Distinguished Scholarship of New York City for his book “Boss of the Grips” and helped get landmark status for the former Colored School No. 4 in Chelsea, the last-known “colored” school in Manhattan. He agreed to do the lecture, which he titled, “Greenwich Village

as Harlem's Preamble and Echo."

Yeager, who managed Black singers such as Odetta and Josh White, helped us strategize about a celebration of the March on Washington. Both Odetta and White performed at the National Mall on that historic day in 1963, so Yeager's insights were invaluable. At first we thought about doing a concert in the space on Sheridan Square that had been Café Society, the first integrated nightclub in New York and the place where Billie Holiday first sang "Strange Fruit." But we realized the space was small and we needed to think big. Someone mentioned the Great Hall of The Cooper Union — the many-columned venue where Abraham Lincoln, John Lewis, Barack Obama and many others have spoken and where the NAACP was born. Yes, that would be amazing, we all thought. But the Great Hall seats 950 people! We had never presented anything in a space nearly that big and had no idea if we could even afford to rent it.

The poster features a central image of a man in a suit, likely Martin Luther King Jr., speaking into a microphone. The background is split into blue and red sections. The text is arranged in a clear, hierarchical manner, with the event title in large, bold letters. The date and location are prominently displayed in the lower right. A QR code is located in the bottom right corner.

THE VILLAGE TRIP PRESENTS
WHERE THE BEAT LIVES ON

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Let Freedom Ring!

Music and Voices
of the March for
Civil Rights
Then and Now

Music, dance, and spoken word
with excerpts from the play
March On by Daniel Carlton

Directed by David Deblinger

Presented with the National Jazz Museum in Harlem and HB Studio

September 21, 2023 | 7:30pm
The Great Hall of The Cooper Union
7 East 7th Street | New York

"Let Freedom Ring!" at the Great Hall is the Trip's biggest event yet. Tickets are still available.

The Great Hall seemed too ambitious for a festival with a small budget and a tiny staff. But we kept thinking, “An event like this belongs in the Great Hall.” We met with Christine Sarkissian, who manages rentals for Cooper Union and visited the Great Hall. We did a bit of negotiating and the school eventually offered us a reduced fee because we’re a nonprofit and were producing an event that overlapped with its mission. We gulped, then signed on the dotted line.

Now we needed someone to create the event itself. One of the highlights of last year’s Village Trip was a reading of excerpts from Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road” with musical accompaniment by David Amram. That event was produced in conjunction with HB Studio, the great West Village theater school, and directed by David Deblinger, a wonderful actor, writer and director who teaches at HB Studio. It was a huge success, so we asked HB and Deblinger to help us with the Great Hall event. Deblinger was understandably wary of taking on such a big task, but loved the idea of commemorating the March with music, spoken word, movement and samples from the Great Hall’s audio archive. Against his better judgment, he said, “O.K., I’ll do it.” The first thing he did was bring in his friend Daniel Carlton, a talented Black actor, playwright and director who had written a play titled “March On,” based on interviews with people who had participated in the March on Washington. Together, Carlton and Deblinger would knit together excerpts from “March On” — which would be directed by Carlton — and new material focusing on what the fight for civil rights means today. You can see what they’ve created on Thurs., Sept. 21. Profits from the evening will go to the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, which is helping us with the event.





Kommuna Lux, which headlined the festival's Ukraine Day at Drom, performed with Lisa Gutkin and the Trip's Artist Emeritus David Amram, above, along with Frank London of The Klezmatics, not pictured. (Village Trip)

With Ukraine being in the news so much and Ukrainian culture playing such an important role in the East Village, we determined to put together an entire day celebrating the country and its creative energy. A band from Odesa called Kommuna Lux had sent us an e-mail after last year's festival saying they'd love to perform at The Village Trip. They had heard about us through the Klezmatics, who headlined our big concert in Washington Square Park last year. We checked out their music and videos online and discovered what a high-energy, cross-genre, kick-ass group they are. We booked them to play at Drom, a fantastic club on Avenue A, as the grand finale of our Ukraine Day and convinced Frank London of the Klezmatics, singer-songwriter Willie Nile, Grammy-winner Julie Gold and David Amram to back them up. Getting the band members visas to come to the U.S. proved to be quite an adventure, but [we succeeded at the last minute](#).

Joan Forsyth, who teaches keyboards at the Third Street Music School, came up with the idea of starting our Ukraine Day with a Play-a-Thon on the portico of St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery in conjunction with District 1 Manhattan of the New York State Music Teachers Association and Steinway & Sons. For inside the church, she and William Anderson, who is her husband, put together a concert featuring chamber music by Ukrainian composers and a performance by the Ukrainian Chorus Dumka of New York. Profits from all our Ukraine events will go to the Ukraine Children's Action Project, a wonderful organization run by Dr. Irwin Redlener and his wife Karen Redlener. Dr. Milch, who has known the Redleners for years, introduced us. Jason Birchard, the third-generation owner of Veselka, the restaurant on Second Avenue that is an anchor of the Ukrainian community, has been helping with our plans, offering sage advice and providing critical support.

As he has for the past two years, Anderson once again put together our classical and new music program, which this year features premieres of work by Errollyn Wallen, Simeon ten Holt, Carman Moore and Aleksandra Vrebalov, as well as a range of composers from Mizzy Mazzoli to Elliott Carter.

For the first time, The Village Trip will present two nights of stand-up comedy, directed and curated by comedians Lindsey Barnes and Katie Finn. We also will present events at the historic Salmagundi Club and Greenwich House Music School, including an intimate concert with the wonderful Julie Gold, Grammy-winning composer of "From a Distance." Back by popular demand will be a cabaret version of the Bernstein-Comden-and-Green musical "Wonderful Town" starring the maestro's daughter Jamie Bernstein and Grammy-winning singer Janis Siegel. Amazing book events will include Gail Papp in conversation with playwright and director George C. Wolfe and an evening with Terri Thal, who was Bob Dylan's first manager, talking to Tom Paxton and Happy Traum, who will sing as well as chat.





From left, Janis Siegel; pianist Yaron Gershovsky, longtime musical director of the Manhattan Transfer; Jamie Bernstein, Leonard Bernstein's daughter; and baritone Michael Kelly at the "Wonderful Town" cabaret night at Joe's Pub on Sept. 13. (The Village Trip)

Putting together all the pieces of a 17-day, 65-event festival was an enormous effort on the part of many creative and talented people. There were plenty of roadblocks, detours and dead-ends. Lots of late nights and hand-wringing. It was fun and crazy in equal parts. The Village Trip runs through Sun., Sept. 24, and plenty of events are still left. Come check it all out and have a good time! For more information and tickets, visit thevillagetrip.com.

Pearson is joint artistic director with Liz Thomson of The Village Trip festival.



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