

# OVERVIEW OF GRAHAMSTOWN JAZZ FESTIVAL

## Festival overview

The National Arts Festival has been running in Grahamstown (Eastern Cape, South Africa [www.nafest.co.za](http://www.nafest.co.za)) since 1974, and is the world's second-largest single cultural festival, attracting performers in all art forms from around South Africa and all over the world. It is undoubtedly the leading cultural exhibition in South Africa and attracts a heterogeneous audience of over 150 000 from around the country, who cram into what is normally a small settler town best known for its academic and legal institutions. Performance venues are thus created in any available venue (school and church halls etc.) and accommodation is at a premium. This, while not up to international festival norms, is what gives Grahamstown its unique character and the festival has developed a large and devoted network of artists and audience from around South Africa and the world.

The Jazz Festival – sponsored by Standard Bank, who sponsor jazz events around the country – has been running since 1989 and the National Youth Jazz Festival (NYJF) ([www.youthjazz.co.za](http://www.youthjazz.co.za)) has been in existence since 1992. The two festivals run as a single entity, organised by the same administrative team, which provides a forum for sound education at the same time as a vibrant performance stage of aesthetic integrity, with the intention of showcasing the variety and depth of South African jazz; providing a unique intercultural opportunity with top international musicians; and teaching the top young players in the country the essence of jazz. The Standard Bank Jazz Festival runs for the 10 days of the National Arts Festival, with the National Youth Jazz Festival running for the first half of the festival.

## Performance venues

### Size of hall and stage

The main jazz performance venue is the DSG Hall – the hall of a private school ([www.dsgschool.com](http://www.dsgschool.com)) that accommodates an audience of 450 squeezed in especially for the National Arts Festival. The room is almost square, quite intimate, and has wooden floors with wood paneling and curtains. During the National Youth Jazz Festival, all unsold seats are taken by students attending the course so that they get as much free live jazz as possible, especially considering that the central problem in jazz development in South Africa is that few towns have any live jazz at all, so students seldom have the opportunity of hearing good jazz. The student audience also ensures a very positive, knowledgeable and supportive audience for the performers (European musician have commented that the Grahamstown audience is one of the best jazz audiences they have performed for). The DSG Hall is a formal venue with bar and limited food facilities, and the ethos is one of serious jazz performance requiring serious audience attention.

### Backstage

There are toilets and two areas for relaxation and preparation before and after performances. Drinks and snacks are provided in this area. The backstage area is available to performers for 45 minutes before the performance and for 30 minutes thereafter.

### Equipment

The equipment used is designed to suit the nature of the performance venue. Available for use:

Drums            Gretsch jazz kit (18" bass, 10", 12", 14" toms, white vellums), Yamaha Custom, assorted hardware  
Percussion      2 Congos, assorted percussion instruments  
Bass amp        Hartke Kickback 12 or 15, VX3500, HA5500 Head with 4 x10 cab, Mark amps  
Piano            Accoustic Grand, Roland RD 600/RD150/GX300 keyboards  
Guitar amp      Peavey Classic 30, Roland JC120  
Assorted top-quality microphones and monitors are available.

### Sound engineer

The chief sound engineer, Les van der Veen, was Recording Engineer at the national SABC Studios, Johannesburg, for many years. He has extensive experience in jazz and has been chief engineer in Grahamstown for twelve years. He has four assistants.

### Auditorium

The second stage is much smaller – 150 seats – and is intended for bands better suited to a more intimate jazz performance, as well as to showcase the many student bands from around the country (and world) that attend the NYJF.

## **Performances**

### Festival philosophy

The Grahamstown Jazz Festival intends to provide a barometer of jazz in South Africa, drawing musicians from around the country in a variety of styles. To this is added a selection of top international musicians, joining the festival to provide a cultural interface, as well as to learn about South African jazz.

The obvious additional focus - with the incorporation of the National Youth Jazz Festival – lies also on providing a serious platform for good young musicians to perform, as well as to interact in a personal and musical sense with top performers, providing an interaction that will assist in inspiring the young players and giving them guidance in a career in jazz, as well as a professional musical network.

### Audience

The audiences in Grahamstown tend to be fairly educated, and come to the festival intending to be artistically challenged. This allows us to present a performance programme that is not dictated purely by economic considerations, and encourages free artistic expression – something few festivals in South Africa have the luxury to do nowadays.

### Times

All Main Jazz Stage performances are at night:

17.00 DSG Hall  
19.00 Auditorium

19.30 DSG Hall  
21.00 Auditorium  
22.00 DSG Hall  
23.30 Auditorium – normally a jam

## **Teaching schedule**

The NYJF is probably the most significant single youth jazz development initiative in South Africa, and the teaching programme is a critical component of the festival. Performing artists are thus chosen also on the basis of their teaching ability. South Africa is a country of extremes, and this shows particularly in the students who attend the NYJF – we draw young players from all over the country with a significant gender and ethnic mix, but while some have a background that has given them excellent formal musical education up to Jazz Masters Degree level, others, despite their natural talent, have had no formal education at all and come from extremely impoverished areas. Students are accepted in three groups: tertiary students, secondary students and development students, the latter of which stipulates indigence and educational disadvantage as prerequisites. Our country's history has doomed many of its inhabitants to poverty, with no chance of meeting their artistic potential, and the festival attempts to make a tangible difference to this situation.

The NYJF offers a variety of jazz workshops, and musicians and teachers are allocated to the teaching schedule depending upon their teaching strengths. On offer are:

- 1) National Youth and National Schools' Bands are selected through an audition process to recognise and challenge the best young players in the country, and they practise and perform during the NYJF.
- 2) All other students are divided into mixed-ability big bands which practice daily, giving a chance to students who do not normally play in a quality ensemble.
- 3) Assorted workshops are offered in jazz history, theory, practice and its associated disciplines such as sound engineering.
- 4) There are many opportunities for student performance – either with their established bands, or in groups created at the festival.
- 5) Students are encouraged to attend all performances (4 a day) and have free entry into each.

## **Accommodation**

Prof Guy Butler – one of the founders of the National Arts Festival – said that attendance at an aesthetic event of this nature in Grahamstown always required a certain amount of discomfort, which enhanced the artistic experience. This discomfort takes the form of penetrating winter cold, for which South African houses are not equipped; amateur venues in a town with only two official theatres; and, particularly, the accommodation available, which does not match the standards of any international festivals. There is only one hotel left in Grahamstown as there is little tourism industry except for the annual festival, and the festival thus depends upon university residences and Bed & Breakfasts, mainly temporarily set up for the duration of the festival.

Our jazz performers and lecturers are hosted in the residences of Rhodes University (a single residence is booked solely for our needs) with single rooms but communal ablution facilities – in Allan Gray

residence. This is within easy walking distance of the Jazz Festival venues, and has easy access to the rest of town. There is wi-fi internet access on the DSG campus.

## **Food**

All performers and teachers at the National Youth Jazz Festival (the first six days of the jazz festival – Wednesday afternoon to Monday night) are provided with three meals a day on the DSG campus. Those staying in the university jazz residence will receive breakfast in their accommodation and the balance of the meals on the campus. The hall is available throughout the day, with drinks and snacks available, and is one of the central places to network.

Effort is made to ensure that the food is of best possible quality, given the limitations of school kitchens, and options are available for different dietary needs. We unfortunately are not in a position to offer 5-star restaurant cuisine, but have seldom had complaints about the quality of meals on offer. An advantage of the dining hall is also its use for social meetings between performers, and the extension of relations between South African and foreign musicians in a less formal context.

Any performers contracted for the second half of the jazz festival (Tuesday to Saturday) will be given S&T payments according to the standard rate offered by the National Arts Festival.

## **Transport**

Port Elizabeth (PE) is 800km south of Johannesburg (1¼ hour flight), and Grahamstown is 130km north-east into the interior by good road. The Jazz Festival has regular, scheduled dedicated bus transport from Port Elizabeth to Grahamstown and performers flying in will be met at PE airport and brought straight to the festival venue.

Performers and teachers will be transported for gigs and all timetabled events where necessary, and there is limited transport available at other times for associated requirements. The DSG campus used for the Jazz Festival is very compact and accessible, with little need for leaving the campus. Grahamstown is also small enough – and the Jazz Festival suitably central – for walking between festival venues and shops etc. where necessary.

## **Security**

Security on the DSG campus – where all teaching and performing takes place – is good, with security guards present when necessary and we provide a locked facility for instruments. There is also good security on the Rhodes University campus, where musicians will be accommodated. There is still, though, an endemic security and theft problem in South Africa, and foreign guests are particularly advised to be alert and avoid walking by themselves at night.

## **Weather**

It is mid-winter in Grahamstown at this time, but the weather can be very changeable. It can be surprisingly hot at midday, but extremely cold at night. South African buildings are not designed for cold weather, so venues can be draughty and cold at night. Temperatures at night are commonly 2-10 degrees C and at day 12-18 degrees C. The residence rooms have heaters and are comfortably warm.

## **Sight-seeing**

The NYJF section of the Jazz Festival schedule is very busy, but there is always time built into the programme for visits to the rest of the National Arts Festival, where all the performance arts are available at a high standard, as well as impressive visual arts displays. Grahamstown is one of the most historically interesting towns in South Africa, and historical tours and explanations can be organised for interested visitors, including social explanations of the very visible results of apartheid. It is also possible to arrange game drives to the game reserves nearby.