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Estes Park mid-May Jazz Fest opens jazz festivals statewide Headliners include Marlena Shaw, Falconaires, Dotsero

Imagine sitting in the sunshine in an intimate, outdoor city amphitheater listening to two days of free non-stop musical entertainment from an international headliner to big band, high energy jazz by popular Denver jazz groups along with a bit of rhythm and blues and you'll come close to envisioning Estes Park's annual Jazz Fest set for May 14 and 15.

The mid-May event kicks off summer jazz festivals throughout the state and the lineup of entertainers draws crowds from throughout the mountain region. Top billing for this year's event is internationally renowned vocalist Marlena Shaw. Also appearing during the two-day festival will be the U.S. Air Force Falconaires, known for their great sounds of Big Band Jazz, the Ken Walker Sextet, Eric Gunnison & Wake Up Call, the Max Wagner Quartet and Dotsero. Jazz Fest is deliberately planned to be the same weekend as Art Walk, so you can visit galleries, listen to some of the best musical talent in the region, have lunch, visit more galleries, and hear more music.

Performances both days begin at 12:30 p.m. in Estes Park's Performance Park amphitheater at 417 West Elkhorn Ave. Those attending are invited to bring their own blankets or lawn chairs. There is no admission charge for any of the performances.

The lineup for this year's event:

Saturday, May 14: 12:30 pm – Estes Park Big Band.

Don't let the group's name, reflective of the community make-up of its membership, fool you. This group of musicians, many of whom have played professionally with headliners throughout the United States prior to their "retirement" in this resort village, is known for its powerful sound that adheres to precepts of the big band era. Now in their 12th year of performing, the band performs the swinging sounds of Duke Ellington, Les Brown, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller and Count Basie.

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Saturday, May 14: 1:30 p.m. – Queen City Jazz Band

This venerable group from Denver has been playing traditional New Orleans style jazz, blues and gospel for more than 40 years. The seven-piece Queen City Jazz recreates the sounds of the 1920s jazz era. Since 1958, the band has been playing traditional New Orleans jazz, blues and gospel, bringing to life the music of such greats as Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, Kid Ory, Bix Beiderbecke and Ma Rainey.

Saturday, May 14: 2:45 p.m. – Ken Walker Sextet

Hailing from Denver, Ken Walker is the sextet's leader and bassist. He's also on the faculty of the Mile High Jazz Camp at the University of Colorado in Boulder and is an instructor of jazz studies at the Lamont School of Music at the University of Denver. He's performed with James Moody, Eric Alexander, Mose Allison, Della Reese and others. The rest of the sextet is also from Denver. Peter Sommer is a tenor saxophonist whose playing has a sense of urgency and adventure. Trumpeter Al Hood teaches trumpet and music theory at the University of Denver Lamont School of Music. Guitarist Dave Corbus is noted for the warmth of his sound, and pianist Jeff Jenkins is a creative virtuoso who utilizes the entire dynamic range of his instrument. Walker has performed as the regular bassist at El-Chapultepec, and with groups including the Art Porter Trio and the popular Artistry. As house bassist for jazz clubs, Walker has accompanied entertainers and international jazz recording artists such as Mose Allison, Eddie Harris, Jon Abercrombie, Clifford Jordan, Eddie Daniels.

Saturday, May 14: 4 p.m. – Dotsero

The Dotsero sound is a strong blend of rock fusion, light funk, smooth soulful melodies and wild improvisation that allows the band to move into a number of jazz veins. Taking their name from a small mountain town in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, Dotsero means "Something Unique" according to the Ute Native American legend to some. To jazz fans worldwide Dotsero means smooth jazz, full of energy and spontaneity that few artists in the genre have been able to match. The band had performed at major jazz festivals; Red Rocks Amphitheatre, JVC Winter Park Jazz Fest, Jazz Tracks Catalina Island Jazz Fest and the Cancun Jazz Festival, among others.

Sunday, May 15: 12:30 p.m. – Max Wagner Quartet.

The Max Wagner Quartet opens Sunday's lineup with a mix of high energy jazz. The quartet consists of Ken Walker on base, Jeff Jenkins on piano, Todd Reed on drums, with Wagner singing jazz vocals and playing the soprano and tenor saxophone. The Durango Herald wrote "Max Wagner's music is food for the soul." The Coloradoan described Wagner as "a world class jazz artist." Wagner also directs Jazz Fest for the Town of Estes Park.

Sunday, May 15: 1:30 p.m. – Air Force Falconaires Jazz Big Band

One of the Air Force's two premier jazz ensembles, the Falconaires has brought the great sounds of Big Band Jazz to national audiences for more than 30 years. This group of 18 full-time jazz musicians specializes in the best of past, present, and future by performing traditional and contemporary big band jazz. To this mix, "Falcs" members add their own compositions and fresh orchestrations. The band regularly appears at prestigious events such as the International Association of Jazz Educators' National Conference, the Music Educators National Conference's National Convention, and Musicfest Canada.

Sunday, May 15: 2:45 p.m. – Marlena Shaw with the Ken Walker Trio.

Born in New York, Shaw's first experience singing before a large audience was with her uncle, who played trumpet and exposed her to the music of jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie. Now a 441 Recording Artist, Shaw's big break in the jazz industry came with the Count Basie Orchestra, where she sang with the band for four years. In 1972, after leaving the Basie Orchestra, Shaw was the first female vocalist signed to Blue Note Records. It was during this period she toured with Sammy Davis Jr.

Vocalist Marlena Shaw is a true original with a sound that is soulful, swinging and versatile. Whether she's delivering a down-home blues or a passionate ballad that's smooth as silk, Shaw's voice translates each song into a very personal statement. In a world of cookie-cutter crooners and by the numbers, scat-happy jazz singers, Marlena Shaw is a true original and one of the most charismatic and versatile vocalists on the scene today. Shaw's scintillating performances blur the lines which separate jazz, soul, rock, pop and R&B. Her extroverted stage presence gives her an edge over other vocalists, and clearly, singing live before an audience is where she feels most comfortable. She has been rewarded for her diversity with scores of enthusiastic admirers.

Sunday, May 15: 4 p.m. – Eric Gunnison & Wake Up Call

Pianist Eric Gunnison was raised in a musical family in Buffalo N.Y. and attended Berklee College of Music in Boston, graduating with a B.A. in Music Composition in 1979. He lives in Denver where he has been a mainstay in the music scene for 19 years. Eric has toured and recorded with vocal jazz group Rare Silk, jazz vocalist Carmen McRae, saxophonist Nelson Rangell, and trumpeter Ron Miles. In addition, he has performed in concert with Dizzy Gillespie, James Moody, Phil Woods, Red Rodney, Bobby Shew, Jerry Bergonzi, John McNeil and Eddie Gomez. As part of the Denver scene, Eric has appeared in concert with both the Colorado and Colorado Springs Symphonies. He also works with his own band, Wake Up Call, performing his original music. As an educator, Eric has worked at the Denver and Cherry Creek schools, CU Boulder, and Metropolitan State College as a performer and clinician. Eric is also active in the local studio scene, having created music for commercials by clients such as TCI, Steamboat Springs, Breckenridge, Primestar, and McDonalds. He frequently plays at Denver's hot jazz spot Dazzle.

Jazz Fest is sponsored by Estes Park Special Events Department of the Estes Park Convention and Visitors Bureau along with Poppy's Restaurant. For more information about Jazz Fest, call the Estes Park Convention & Visitors Bureau at 800-443-7837.