This page was exported from - Shelburne Free Press
Export date: Sat Oct 31 18:12:06 2026 / +0000 GMT

Blues, jazz and 40,000 people pack downtown Orangeville for annual festival weekend

Written By SAM ODROWSKI

About 40,000 people flowed through downtown Orangeville this past weekend as the Orangeville Blues and Jazz Festival once again turned the town into a multi-stage celebration of music, food and local culture ? despite financial headwinds behind the scenes.

Festival founder and artistic director Larry Kurtz said the lineup of over 40 bands struck a strong balance between blues and jazz, with fans able to enjoy JUNO-award-winning and nominated acts across all three stages from June 5 to 7.

?Overall, I felt it went great. We had lots of happy, smiling people throughout the downtown,? Kurtz said. ?The headliners on Friday, Saturday, Sunday ? all three acts were excellent.?

He added, ?It was a thrill for me personally to have Emily-Claire Barlow come and play jazz for us on the main stage. I feel she's one of the greatest jazz singers in the country.?

Other headliners included Alex Pangman & Her Alleycats, Blackburn Brothers, Miss Emily and Paul James Band.

Beyond the main stages, much of the festival's impact could be felt in the streets of downtown Orangeville itself, where crowds spilled well beyond the performance areas and into the core's shops, patios and sidewalks.

Kurtz said that atmosphere is an intentional part of how the festival is designed, with programming structured to keep activity flowing across multiple spaces rather than centred on a single stage.

?It's a showcase for the beautiful downtown, for sure,? he said. ?Showing us at our best, where there's tons to do and it's very welcoming.?

Even after scheduled performances wrapped on the street in the evening, the energy didn't dissipate.

Kurtz said that the pause in programming is deliberate, creating a transition point between outdoor stages and continued performances in the park.

?We plan it that the music wraps up on the street,? he said. ?We're hoping people come into the park, where it continues to 11 p.m.?

But what stood out most, he said, was how the downtown continued to function as a gathering place even without live music as a focal point. On Saturday night, he described seeing Broadway filled wall-to-wall with people simply lingering, talking and moving through the core.

?At 8 p.m. when everything had ended on the street, it was totally packed as far as the eye could see ? from Wellington all the way up First Street,? Kurtz said. ?No music happening, no entertainment, just people milling about and socializing.?

He said that kind of gathering captures what the festival has become over its 20-plus-year history: not just a series of performances, but a shared space where the town itself becomes part of the experience.

?It was amazing to see,? he said. ?They're entertaining themselves just by hanging out and talking and enjoying it.?

Still, Kurtz said the festival's success on the ground comes alongside mounting financial pressure behind the scenes. While attendance held steady at around 40,000 people, he said, reduced government funding has created a noticeable gap in the

organization's budget this year.

He pointed to a significant drop in grant support, including the loss of a $50,000 Experience Ontario grant that the festival received the previous year. Heritage funding was also cut nearly in half, dropping from about $23,000 to $14,000. Kurtz said those reductions have forced organizers to reassess how the festival is financed moving forward.

Despite those challenges, Kurtz said the festival continues to rely on a combination of community support, sponsorship and volunteer effort to keep operations running. He noted that while local backing from the town and Orangeville BIA remains strong, replacing lost funding at higher levels of government is an ongoing concern.

?The financing of the festival? we don't know the balance sheet yet,? he said. ?We have to work on that and find other alternatives.?

He added that organizers are already exploring new fundraising approaches, including expanding a 50/50 draw introduced this year to generate additional revenue.

For Kurtz, the music may draw the crowds, but it's the shared social experience that defines the festival's success.