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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice! Welcome back, Annie.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 A bigger party rolls into summer

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2 Next Stage reimagines Bandwagon Summer Series with
3 mini-festivals designed to deepen community connection

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4 TEXT BODY:

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5 Next Stage Arts Summer Bandwagon Series, an area arts
6 offering that evolved during the pandemic, will return this year
7 with some changes.

8 According to Next Stage Operations and
9 Communications Director Heather Ahrenholz, “we’ve re-
10 imagined this season based on community input and what we’ve
11 observed about how audiences gather and engage.”

12 And so the nine programs in the 2026 series will feature
13 four multi-bill events engaging audiences for full “afternoons and
14 evenings of music, food, and community connection.”

15 Next Stage first offered a lineup of outdoor shows during
16 the Covid lockdown in 2020 to bring the community together
17 through outdoor performances while maintaining social
18 distancing. The outdoor concerts returned in 2021 as the
19 Bandwagon Summer Series, offering relief for many from the
20 confines of that time.

21 The concerts took place in a variety of venues, from
22 Brattleboro to Putney and, now, to Bellows Falls. The signature of
23 the series was and still is a mobile tiny house — a bandwagon, if
24 you will, designed by Putney architect Chip Greenberg — which
25 provides a backdrop for the performers.

26 **An ‘absolute necessity’**

27 In recent years, leadership at Next Stage, which produces
28 a full lineup of a wide range of arts events year round, has
29 studied trends and community feedback.

30 Natalie Dreyer, who took over as Next Stage’s executive
31 director last year, says “one of the first things that I got to do
32 when I [took the] job was attend a Bandwagon show” and
33 describes being “excited by that energy.”

34 “Having finally survived the Vermont winter, I now
35 understand the joy of the Bandwagon on a whole new level,”
36 Dreyer says. “It’s the absolute necessity of really gathering in
37 fields and dancing together and enjoying music and being in
38 community.”

39 Since then, Dreyer, with an inevitably fresh perspective,
40 and the Next Stage staff and board, “have assessed how both the
41 community and Next Stage have changed.”

42 “We’re trying to figure out what works really well for us,”
43 says Dreyer, who came to Putney with a background in
44 educational theater.

45 “When Next Stage first started Bandwagon, it was the
46 only game in town. It was the only outdoor performance space
47 during Covid, and it was such a special place,” she says.

48 Post-Covid, though, “it’s a different world.”

49 “We noticed that one of our highest attended
50 performances last summer was the Celtic and Québécois Festival
51 at Scott Farm, over Labor Day weekend,” Dreyer says, noting that
52 more than 400 attended.

53 With what the team at Next Stage —Dreyer, Ahrenholz,
54 and Programming and Production Director Barry Stockwell —
55 call a winning combination of venue and performers, “it was a
56 wonderful day. So we got to talking about what made that so
57 special and how we could build off of that [event’s] energy,”
58 Dreyer recalls.

59 Thus emerged the notion of mini-festivals — having three
60 or more artists/groups on a bill — and a theme for each.

61 When a couple of community members suggested that it
62 would “be really awesome if the middle schoolers got to play the
63 opening act for a Bandwagon concert,” the first mini-fest, “Fun
64 Fest for Kids and Kids at Heart,” took root, Dreyer says.

65 The event on Saturday, June 13 will feature Putney
66 Central Middle School Modern and Jazz Bands and Brattleboro’s
67 DiTrani Brothers playing original and traditional tunes drawing
68 influence from western and Eastern-European folk music, Roma
69 swing, and early American jazz and ragtime.

70 “And then I started thinking about what it means to really
71 extend our community to even more people,” says Dreyer, who
72 most recently was director of curriculum and collaborative
73 learning with the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and manager
74 of school partnerships and professional development at Trinity
75 Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island.

76 And then, she thought: “If we’re throwing this big party
77 where all these kids and families are going to be here,” why not
78 invite the many organizations who work with children and

79 families during the summer “to come out and talk about the
80 programming they do and do an activity with young people”?

81 Thus, more than 10 community organizations will be
82 “tabling or bringing an activity to our fun fest for that first kickoff
83 performance,” Dreyer says. New England Center for Circus Arts
84 (NECCA) of Brattleboro will be on site with its rig so attendees
85 can experience flying, and Sandglass Theater in Putney will offer
86 a puppet program at intermission.

87 **Memorable mini-festivals**

88 What else could comprise a mini-festival?

89 After a few rounds of multi-bill shows at Scott Farm in
90 Dummerston in 2021 and 2023, as well as last year, Stockwell
91 says, “we started thinking, ‘Let’s do that more.’”

92 The benefits of bringing musicians together, he adds, are
93 many: Often, common ground emerges and sometimes the
94 musicians already know each other and may join in on each
95 other’s tunes now and then during the course of the three-to-four-
96 hour event.

97 “And it really makes the show memorable,” Stockwell
98 says.

99 The other mini-festivals this year will include a Folk,
100 Roots, and Americana Music Festival with The Mammals, Michael
101 Veitch Band, and Doozy Jane at Robertson Paper Company Field
102 in Bellows Falls (Saturday, July 18); a Homegrown Festival with
103 The Gaslight Tinkers, ECCA, and Zara Bodé’s Little Big Band at
104 West River Park in Brattleboro (Sunday, Aug. 30); and the Celtic
105 and Québécois Music Festival with Poor Man’s Gambit, Cantrip,
106 and Cécilia at Scott Farm (Monday, Sept. 7).

107 Food vendors will be on site and peripheral activities
108 offered. Among them, area artist Amber Paris “will have a station
109 at each of these mini-fests where community members can help
110 create an art piece that will then be installed in our community
111 room in the fall as a sort of celebration of Next Stage’s vision and
112 values,” Dreyer says.

113 “It’s just a bigger party,” Stockwell adds. With five single-
114 act two-hour concerts as well, he calls the series “a nice mix” of
115 summer offerings.

116 Dreyer adds that the shift amounts to “reinvesting in
117 really driving energy and audience to these bigger events. And, I
118 think, we’re producing and presenting as many, if not more,
119 artists” as in past Bandwagon seasons.

120 Arts in the community

121 For Stockwell, who has been at Next Stage Arts since its
122 inception in 2011, the series reflects a commitment to bring the
123 community into the arts and arts into the community

124 “On a personal level, you know, this is my hometown,”
125 he says. “I grew up here, and it’s so satisfying to bring the arts to
126 Putney, Brattleboro, and the whole area.”

127 Having lived across the street from what was once
128 Windham College and is now Landmark College, Stockwell, a
129 musician in his own right, recalls hearing concerts there and
130 even playing some.

131 “Actually, my band would open for national acts and
132 plays and sports events,” he says.

133 In addition to the mini-festivals, the Bandwagon Summer
134 2026 lineup includes these single-act concerts:

135 • Friday, June 26: Reverend Vince Anderson & The Love
136 Choir (dirty gospel) at Putney Inn Field (57 Putney Landing Rd.,
137 Putney).

138 • Sunday, July 5: Las Guaracheras (salsa and Latin jazz)
139 at Next Stage Arts (15 Kimball Hill, Putney).

140 • Saturday, Aug. 1: Bread & Puppet (puppeteers and
141 sourdough bakers from Glover) at Retreat Farm (45 Farmhouse
142 Square off Route 30, Brattleboro).

143 • Friday, Aug. 14: Bywater Call (seven-piece Southern
144 soul and roots rock band from Toronto) at Putney Inn Field.

145 • Saturday, Sept. 26: Kotoko Brass (called “propulsive,
146 infectious party music” by *The Boston Globe*) at Putney Inn Field.

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For ticket information, visit [nextstagearts.org/bandwagon-](https://nextstagearts.org/bandwagon-summer-series#/events)

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[summer-series#/events](https://nextstagearts.org/bandwagon-summer-series#/events). Kids under 12 can attend the outdoor

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concerts for free.

151

Ahrenholz, who grew up in the area, too, and has been

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with Next Stage Arts since 2021, adds that Next Stage donates

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Bandwagon passes to libraries across Windham County. Season

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passes are also available.

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