

# IF THEY BUILD IT, YOU WILL COME

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## More Than a Little Voodoo Goes into assembling the Voodoo Music experience



What music lovers will go through to see their favorite acts is nothing short of fervent dedication. From the more popular camp-outs, to the more extreme hiding in the musician's dressing rooms, fans do what they can to be close to the music they love, even if that also means being soaked by continuous rain at an outdoor music festival.

For a festival that's known for not allowing attendees to bring umbrellas on the grounds, the 2009 Voodoo Experience packed people by the thousands none-the-less, many of whom resulted to giant black garbage bags as a protectant from the rain. And as much of an inconvenience it was for ticket holders to slosh through the mud of the grounds of City Park where the festival is held, imagine what the production crew of the outdoor music festival had to deal with keeping all the sound equipment and staging functional and dry.

"We've found keeping the stages above water works best," says producer and founder of the music festival, Stephen Rehage, in an e-mail.

So exactly how long and how far in advance does it take to prepare and execute a 3-day music festival with anywhere between 30,000-55,000 people in attendance each day and more than 130 plus acts to organize? According to Rehage, the process is "perpetual in motion."

From its humble beginnings in 1999 with a handful of acts that ranged between the mainstream hit-makers of the music scene on the charts, to the local bands revered and well-loved for playing in music venues across the city as well as on the street corner, Voodoo has grown to include the same hodgepodge of musicians after more than a decade of being on the music scene. "What makes Voodoo unique is it's a musical gumbo where the biggest acts in the world are guests of our local musicians," Rehage says.

With the onslaught of both national and local musicians coming together to fit on the same bill, Rehage says it takes about a year-and-a-half of planning what musicians the staff wants to book for the festival, with artists and their management teams locking in their plans 8-10 months prior to the festival taking place.

Next, Stefan Beese, who draws up the technical design of the entire festival site including the staging, along with Megan Grant, who directs the production and building of all these elements, work together to produce an experience that is centered around the music.

"When designing this temporary city with all its elements, we always look at the stage position first, as these are the focus points of the festival; all the other assets then wrap around these," Beese says in an e-mail. "For the design of the stages,

practicality and function come first, we then focus on shape and aesthetic.”

Practicality and function heavily comes to the forefront when trying to plan an outdoor festival around the unpredictable New Orleans weather. Rehage recalls how in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina, the team hustled to build the stages twice in two different locations between New Orleans and Memphis. He also remembers years ago when 21-straight days of rain before the festival caused a family of ducks to take shelter under one of the tents while in construction. “They were electronic music fans it seems,” he says.

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#### VOODOO RECRUITS INTERNS FROM LOYOLA’S MUSIC INDUSTRY, TULANE’S ARCHITECTURE AND XAVIER’S COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMS TO ASSIST IN PLANNING THE FESTIVAL.

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Because of the amounts of rain the festival may encounter, Beese says that in 2010, the Voodoo production team incorporated the use of saddle spanish roofs, which are curved architectural fabric structures that are more contemporary in style and lightweight in appearance for the staging. Rehage adds that with the use of stages of this sort, it doubles as a rain protectant and sun shading device that wraps over the stage deck mimicking an umbrella. With it’s opening and apex at the front of the structure, it allows the crowd to see performances from a distance. Grant says the main stage is built seven to eight days prior to the start of the festival, with all other staging being built the Monday before.

“We work very closely on an annual basis with each staging entity to ensure that all engineering is 100 percent up to date on both codes and required safety protocols,” Grant says in an e-mail. “The safety of our fans and our team is the number one priority.”

A team that does not solely rely on the staffers of Voodoo, but also on its interns. Each year, Voodoo reaches out to the Music Industry Program at Loyola University, the School of Architecture at Tulane University and the Communications and Marketing Departments from Xavier University as a way for college students to gain internship opportunities and/or college credit for the work they do at Voodoo. Each intern applies for a specific department that they feels would match their skill set, and are trained by the Voodoo Volunteer Coordinator on what duties they are responsible for in the weeks leading up to the event and the duration of the music festival’s weekend.

“We are fortunate that our home town is also the greatest musical city in the world and has an abundance of talented people both working in the music business and, or looking to,” Rehage says of the volunteers, many of who have gone on to work full time at Rehage Entertainment, the company that produces Voodoo.

And when the last act bids farewell to the Voodoo crowds, is when the last phase of events settles in -- the clean-up. The music festival contracts an outside clean up crew to help break down and clean up the waste from the festival, a process Rehage says happens throughout the weekend. Rehage says the site as a whole takes about a week to disassemble and restore to its pre-festival condition, a feat that is once again contingent upon weather conditions. So, where does all the trash end up after the Voodoo Experience?

“I have no idea,” says Rehage. “I assume to Sidney Torres’ house.”

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