

LIFESTYLE

Despite a Divisive Election Year, Roots Picnic Brings People Together in the Name of Peace, Unity, Black Music

By Micha Green
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Kicking off Black Music Month on June 1 and June 2, more than 30,000 people flocked to the grounds of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's West Fairmount Park, for Roots Picnic 2024, a celebration of culture and togetherness.

Despite regular rhetoric about dueling presidential campaigns and violence, this year's Roots Picnic was a place to promote peace, encourage civic engagement and vibe out to outstanding acts from Lil Wayne and The Roots, Jill Scott, Nas, Gunna, Babyface, Funkmaster Flex, The Dream, Sexy Redd and local artists such as Wale, Backyard Band (with Scarface and Amerie) and Shaboozey.

For a moment in time—well, a weekend, to be exact—thousands jammed in the name of peace and unity.

"No one was thinking about who the president is, or what alternative moments or agendas were. In that moment, everyone was present, with the music, with each other, just living our best moment," said Alicia W., of Columbus, Ohio, who preferred not to use her last name.

This was Alicia W.'s first time coming to the annual music festival, and she was amazed to see the camaraderie in action.

"I have friends that come every year. I figured I needed to be in the mix this year," she told *The Informer*. "I have never seen so many people of different shapes, sizes and colors all on one accord. So to be able to see a diverse group of people, bobbing to The Dream, Nas, and even dropping it low for Sexy Redd was an amazing experience."

Alicia W.'s friend, Alea B., who also preferred not to use her last name, emphasized the beauty of the diversity



▲ Thousands flocked to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's West Fairmount Park for Roots Picnic 2024 on June 1 and June 2. (Brigitte Squire/*The Washington Informer*)

found at the annual affair.

"It was just so amazing to see old and young vibing together—white and Black, Hispanic, everybody was just coming together. People were so pleasant and respectful," said Alea B. "It was one big family picnic and I really enjoyed it."

She considered historic events like Bethel, New York's Woodstock, in August 1969 and the Harlem Cultural Festival, which happened the same year and inspired the 2021 documentary "Summer of Soul (...Or When the Revolution Could not be Televised)," directed by Questlove of The Roots.

"Nobody was caring about who was president today or tomorrow. If you look at history, music really brings people together and that is what it did," Alea B. told *The Informer*.

Celebrated singer, songwriter and arts mogul Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds noted music's ability to connect people and transcend time and space.

"Music is like the one thing that connects us all. It's like we get to time travel. Anytime you hear your favorite song it takes you back to that perfect place, that perfect time, that perfect person," Babyface said, before adding a joke, "or maybe not that perfect person."

KEEPING ADVOCACY AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE MUSICAL CELEBRATION

While Roots Picnic offered two days in musical heaven, with an abundance of legendary artists

performing, collaborating and sharing their bountiful talents with the massive crowds, it was also an opportunity to promote the need for a more just, peaceful, and equitable society.

When walking onto the festival grounds, one of the first booths fans engaged with was sponsored by Michelle Obama's When We All Vote, where people were encouraged to check their voter registration status and offered free swag bags that were perfect to use during the two-day festival.

A few booths down from When We All Vote was Garry Mills' Shoot Basketballs Not People, a community-based organization in Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood.

"Our mission is to use basketball as a vehicle to change and save lives, and our long term goal is to open up a facility in our neighborhood," Mills told *The Informer*. "We started in 2013. I was doing this with two full-time jobs. No grant money. We actually just got our first grant after 10 years."

The organization, which serves youth through the positive foundations taught in basketball, is featured in a documentary on Prime Video and Fox Soul, called "Bad Things Happen in Philadelphia."

Mills said Roots Picnic was the perfect place to spread his message about promoting peace instead of violence.

"The Roots Picnic is one of the more peaceful events in Philly that brings all cultures together, honestly. But we felt this fits our mold because it's a basketball town

and we wanted to make the social cause cool," he explained.

Kristal Bush, executive director of Free My Weedman, told *The Informer* she came to Roots Picnic in order to continue advocating for equity in the cannabis space.

"This is where the community is. As the cannabis industry unfolds, they can create these dispensaries, they can lobby to not include us, but what they cannot take away is that [Black people] are the culture. And that's what the Roots Picnic is, it's the culture," Bush said.

The equity advocate explained the historic connection between Black music and the criminalization of cannabis.

"Music is really [involved] in this whole war on cannabis. When you talk about this whole war on drugs, it was targeted for the jazz players. They said it was the jazz players who were the ones that were smoking up the reefer and raping the white women. And they were blaming it on cannabis," she emphasized.

After years of African Americans facing criminalization, convictions and long term prison sentences for marijuana related incidents, Bush used her time at the Roots Picnic to remind attendees that Black people should be at the forefront of the legal cannabis industry.

"It's time to undo those harms, and the only opportunity—and our last opportunity—is ensuring equity in this cannabis industry," she emphasized. "Run us our money. We ain't playing. Period."

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▲ Singer Babyface performs at Roots Picnic 2024 on June 2. (Brigitte Squire/*The Washington Informer*)