



Clockwise from bottom left: the South Indian Nrityagram Dance Ensemble; the Spanish moss covered walkway in Forsyth Park; Ana Moura performing in the Temple Mickve Israel synagogue, consecrated in 1878; violinist and associate artistic director Daniel Hope with Stewart Copeland

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

# SAVANNAH MUSIC FESTIVAL

## GEORGIA, US

**Jo Frost explores the charming southern American city of Savannah during its springtime musical extravaganza**

“Ah, Southern Hospitality!” exclaimed a friend when I mentioned I was going to Georgia. Another looked surprised and asked: “What, Georgia, as in the Caucasian country?” But once I’d clarified that I was going to Georgia in the Deep South of America – and more specifically Savannah – the overwhelming reaction from people who had been was reassuringly enthusiastic.

I must confess to having known very little about Savannah prior to my visit to its music festival this year. But it turns out Savannah has a lot going for it. Founded in 1733 by the English General Oglethorpe, it’s one of the most historical – and most visited – cities in the US, attracting close to six million tourists a year – not bad for a city with a population of around 130,000. Situated on the Savannah River, only 20 minutes drive from the Atlantic coast, the city got rich trading cotton in the 18th century. The big attraction for visitors these days is the

wonderfully preserved historic district. However there’s no escaping the legions of tourists who come to retrace the places mentioned in John Berendt’s atmospheric novel *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, or emerald green-clad visitors who take part in the enormous St Patrick’s Day parade. But, for just over two weeks in late March-early April, the foremost reason to visit is the Savannah Music Festival.

The festival prides itself in offering something for everybody. And scanning the lengthy and diverse programme of around 100 events, it’s hard to disagree. The 17-day duration of the festival offers a combination of American roots music – from Cajun and bluegrass to blues and country – plus classical, jazz and a healthy dose of music from across the world.

The high quality and variety of the programming is thanks to its native Georgian artistic director Rob Gibson, who put the festival on the map when he joined in 2002. Previously known as the Savannah

Onstage International Arts Festival, it had been floundering. But Gibson’s experience as co-founder of Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York injected the SMF programming with an adventurous and diverse flavour. “It’s always been pretty varied, but as we’ve grown the festival, we’ve been able to make it more varied,” says Gibson about the programme. “We’ve started to build up a trust with the audience now, where they’ll buy tickets to events of groups that they’ve never heard. Not a lot of people have heard of Ali Akbar Moradi [Iranian Kurdish *tanbur* player] but not a lot of people know Steve Riley and Mamou Playboys either. But if you sell something as a ‘Cajun dance party,’ they come to expect something and to come and have a good time.”

And the Savannahians certainly seem to have implicit trust in Gibson’s choices, with the majority of the concerts selling out. Practically every event I attended was warmly received and given a standing ovation – possibly the reason the artists



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seem to love performing here. Also, there’s no escaping that ‘Southern Hospitality’: people will strike up a conversation with you as soon as you sit down and once they hear that ‘you’re not from around here,’ they’re offering all sorts of tips and advice on where to go and what to see in their elegant city.

Savannah is the ideal place for the directionally-challenged as, like most US cities, it’s devised on a grid system. Easily walkable, the city is built around 21 statue or fountain-filled squares, each one you come across seemingly more beautiful than the one before and all filled with oak trees veiled in Spanish moss lending an ethereal feel. Spring in Savannah is the ideal time to visit as the squares are awash with the colour of blossoming azalea bushes, and, should your



**HOW TO GET THERE**

- There are no direct flights from the UK but most of the major American airlines fly to Savannah via the main US hubs like Atlanta, Chicago or Washington.
- Savannah’s airport is 13 kilometres west of the city. Once in town, the historic district is best explored on foot.
- There are plenty of hotels and B&Bs in Savannah: visit [www.savannahvisit.com](http://www.savannahvisit.com) or [www.exploregeorgia.org](http://www.exploregeorgia.org) for more details.

hectic SMF programme allow it, you can do your own Forrest Gump impersonation (the famous ‘Life is like a box of chocolates’ scene was filmed in Chippewa Square), and while away hours sitting on a bench watching Savannahians go about their business.

British violinist Daniel Hope was invited to become associate artistic director in 2003 and now programmes the ‘Sensations’ chamber music series. The appeal of coming back to Savannah each year has a lot to do with the public, says Hope: “The audience are so happy and friendly and everyone comes up and talks to you. It’s particular to this place, there’s something just very special about it. They express their appreciation – you don’t really get that anywhere else.”

The beauty of having a festival in a city of this size is the proximity of all the venues, although you easily clock up quite a few miles walking from one concert to the next. Gibson has the solution; he whizzes around town between the dozen different venues on a bicycle, the perfect method of transport,

especially when he insists on getting on stage and personally introducing every single concert. “I am very hands on,” he admits. “I want it to be as personal, as soulful as it can possibly be, but it’s not about bringing my personality to it... This is a small community, everybody knows each other.”

The opening day is a good benchmark for what SMF has to offer. The festival kicks off with some inspiring Brazilian harmonica and guitar playing from Gabriel Grossi and Daniel Santiago at the newly opened, 200-seat Charles H Morris Center – so brand new that the power was only connected two minutes before the concert began. That evening there are tricky decisions to be made – whether to see the young Chinese piano prodigy Yundi Li at the 1920s-style Lucas Theatre or hold out for the gospel sounds of The Blind Boys of Alabama. Then, to round off, some bluegrass’n’blues from the Steep Canyon Rangers. This is, after all, the Deep South and when in Rome...

Over the next 16 days the programming gets more and more diverse: a specially commissioned evening by The Police drummer Stewart Copeland, with a 17-piece orchestra and another Savannah exclusive called ‘The World of Slide Guitar’ with Debashish Bhattacharya and Bob Brozman among others. *Fado* singer Ana Moura performed in Temple Mickve Israel, one of the oldest synagogues in the US; and old-school rhythm’n’blues by Nappy Brown plus Ali Akbar Moradi who played an intimate set surrounded by classical Western art in the Telfair Academy of Arts & Sciences gallery. And on top of all the music, there’s a silent movie series, plus a free educational programme for over 20,000 young people, Swing Central, which incorporates a high school jazz band competition and workshops.

2009’s highlights include big names from Mariza to Zakir Hussain and Shivkumar Sharma, plus Béla Fleck’s Africa Project featuring Toumani Diabaté and Vusi Mahlasela. With artists of this calibre, Georgia’s largest musical arts festival is certain to become a must-do date on the world’s festival calendar. ●

[www.savannahmusicfestival.org](http://www.savannahmusicfestival.org)  
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