

Organizational History of the Beaver Island Music Festival

The story of our community festival starts with an unplanned event in 2003. That magical night in the middle of the woods, off the grid, on a small island in Lake Michigan, was the beginning of the Beaver Island Music Festival or “Music in the Woods”.

BIMF started as a casual plot to get Stephen and his band Simplicity to the island. With little planning involved they were going to consider the event a “trial run”. Carol, however, had bigger ideas. She thought that it would be fun if, we invited everyone! She created a flyer about the event and put one in every mailbox. The band arrived on the ferry, a stage was erected on a trailer, equipment was plugged into a generator, a bonfire was built, and music flowed through the forest. The Burton family and friends totaling about 40 came to the island and camped out for the weekend. In addition, 75 Islanders and Central Michigan University students made their way to the woods to attend the first festival. Everyone deemed the night a musical success.

So much positive response spread across the Island and Michigan that they decided to continue this musical event. Dan and Carol Burton, Bayard Kurth and Stephen Garcia, with the help of friends and family could not resist the opportunity to create a festival that would be inspiring, and beneficial to the community of Beaver Island. Dan brought his building skills and property. Bayard added his island roots and artistic talents. Carol brought her organizational skills and community-family involvement. Stephen added his musical talent and connections. Little did the Burton’s know that in the years to come they would be welcoming thousands of people from Michigan and beyond to their home for this event. Together their shared love of the island, its history, culture, and landscape, opened the doors for creating what is one of the most unique festivals in Michigan.

The founder’s vision was to bring talented artists to the island and share the landscape with them as well as the people that they would soon draw from across the country. This brought about our mission statement:

The purpose of the Beaver Island Music Festival is to promote the variety and tradition of all music and art. We want to create opportunities for all artists, be an educational resource, and strongly encourage community and family involvement in an outdoor environment combining nature, renewable energies, music, and artwork. Our main goal is to bring attention to the beautiful world that we live in (especially Beaver Island) by uniting all of these talents and people.

The event that began as a “casual plot” in 2003 is now a structured and developed three-day festival. Due to its growth, administrative, and financial demands, a larger community effort became necessary. It was clear that the event had become so popular they would need extra help. Following the 10th anniversary in 2012 the Burton’s reached out for support. In order to ensure that the festival remain accessible to everyone, a dedicated group of island residents formed the Beaver Island Music Festival board and began the process of moving BIMF into a non-profit organization. In April of 2013, Beaver Island Music Festival Inc. was approved for its 501©(3) non-profit status. The prompt approval is credited to having an established mission statement, by-laws, and excellent financial and historical reporting.

Covering many genres in a single festival is what has made our festival an exceptional and one-of-a-kind event. Over 700 artists and 200 groups and solo musicians, have performed at the festival from 2003 to 2015. BIMF brings an original and diverse line-up of Americana, Appellation, Blues, Bluegrass, Boogie, Country, Crabgrass, Classical, Celtic, Folk, Irish, Jam, Jazz, Mountain, Pop, Roots, Rock, Reggae, R&B, Soul, Traditional, and many imaginative twists of style. The festival has presented comedians, clowns, magicians, hula hooping, fire twirling, belly dancing, yoga, and one-man band acts to engage the audience. BIMF offers opportunity for anyone to participate during Open Mic sessions, or “Kids Time” involving children, parents, and artists. Many musicians perform on the Beaver Island Ferry over the course of the festival.

BIMF has an established well maintained website, www.bimf.net, and an impressive Facebook following. We include our followers in the marketing and planning of the festival by actively seeking their input. We involve the community and festival family in planning meetings including the selection of the artists. Each year we receive over 300 applications from artists hoping to perform.

Continuing improvements are made to the facilities including stages, sound equipment, festival equipment, camping areas, parking, food and vending areas, recycling stations, transportation systems, restroom facilities, and much more to enhance the festival. We are handicap accessible so our festival is open to everyone. We have an established Quiet Camp for families and their children, monitored and overseen. We have created policies and guidelines to establish a safe environment.

The BIMF staff is a solid core group of individuals, many of them young adults that volunteer their time to work and maintain the festival including set up, cleaning, ticket handling, information, drivers, fire and campground monitors, stage help, sound, recycling, and security. We work with the Beaver Island Fire Department, EMS, and the Sherriff's Department to ensure the safety of all who attend. A volunteer group from the Beaver Island Lighthouse School assists in maintaining the festival grounds and we continue to expand our youth involvement every year.

BIMF strives to develop working relationships in areas of business, communities, family, schools, and other community based organizations. In 2014 we worked with the Running Blind Organization bringing a large group out to enjoy the festival and to interact with many of the artists. We hold the belief that working together we can create a wonderful experience for everyone.

BIMF has a large and diverse audience. People of all ages and backgrounds from across the country and beyond attend the event. Those that attend the festival each year consist of about 25% Beaver Island Residents, 25% returning festival-goers, and 50% new festival attendees many of whom have never been to Beaver Island. From demographic information gathered attendance is evenly distributed over all age groups. That is an amazing accomplishment! We are definitely proud to have created an atmosphere where it is "cool" for teens and children to come to an event with their parents and grandparents.

BIMF's main support has come from founders, Dan and Carol Burton. With help from friends and family they are dedicated to the development and administration of BIMF. The festival is primarily funded by ticket sales. Ticket prices are set low to compare favorably with mainland music Festivals, which do not have the additional cost burden of transportation to and from the Island. This can add a minimum of \$50 per person. BIMF has also reached out to local businesses and community for advertising sponsorships. The festival is generously supported by volunteers, a board of directors, donations, and sponsors. One of our best attributes is that we have reached top quality performers who understand the obstacles of creating such a unique event and accept reduced fees for the opportunity to be a part of the festival. In turn they find themselves with a loyal and large fan base. We have been dubbed a "VIP Festival" because attendees have the opportunity to get to know the artists and the artists have the opportunity to meet and perform with other artists. Over the past 13 years BIMF has been able to move forward thanks to the generous support from the people involved.

BIMF has an excellent strategic planning committee consisting of board members, local business owners and community leaders. This allows us to effectively develop monthly and yearly progress plans for projects, address festival development, capacity building, financial planning and fund raising opportunities as well as set and prioritize goals to establish a strong community wide organization. BIMF is in the process of developing programs that we believe will enhance island events and create more opportunities for supporting year-round cultural activities with a focus on variety and tradition of music and art.

The Beaver Island Music Festival has become much more to the island community than a set of musical performances. It is a way of bringing hundreds of visitors to Beaver Island each year to enjoy the natural beauty and community spirit that makes us who we are. The island depends a great deal on tourism and the festival provides a great boost. Many festival participants bring family and friends with them, some which return every year. The dates for the festival were established in coordination with the Beaver Island Historical Society to aid in increasing numbers for the island's annual Museum Week. This advance planning with another island event has generated what is now the largest visitor week on Beaver Island. Some festival participants have even purchased land and/or homes on the island. The island's primary economic development strategy for decades now has been to encourage people to come and visit. The Beaver Island Music Festival with its music-in-the-woods vibe and community-based approach has become a mainstay in the effort.