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Music Sounds Better by the Sea

At a Bamfield British Columbia music festival

Story and photos by Marianne Scott

To herald the Festival's start, Shawn Spicer plays a trumpet fanfare from Bamfield Inlet.



Bamfield lies on Barkley Sound, on the wild west coast of Vancouver Island where the Pacific Ocean belies its name and where mighty winter winds can batter shores and whip the water into towering walls. Here too is the northern trailhead of the famous [West Coast Trail](#), constructed more than a century ago as a lifesaving measure for coastal passengers trying to swim ashore from foundering ships. With shipwrecks now thankfully a rarity, its main attraction today is international trekkers avid for a challenge.

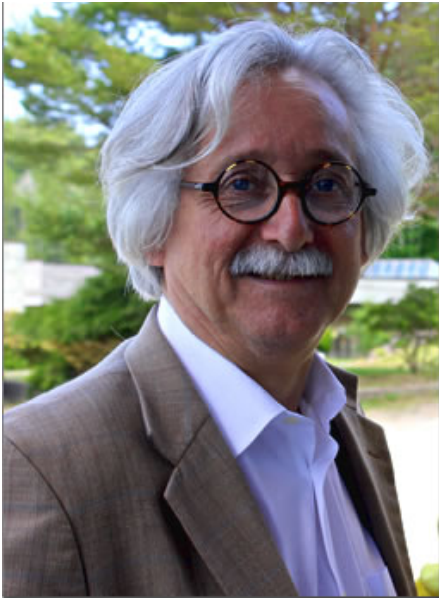
In winter, when nearly endless precipitation nourishes the rain forests, the town of Bamfield has only about 150 inhabitants, Postmistress Rose Janelle told me. But in summer, the place bulges with visitors ... especially during the second week of July when the **Music by the Sea Festival** takes place.

It's this festival that attracted my husband and me to Bamfield in July 2012. We weren't sure what to expect — could a small funky town with its Coast Guard Search and Rescue station and sport fishing as a livelihood produce 10 concerts in eight days?

A Cherished Dream Becomes Reality



The Music by the Sea Festival is the result of a cherished dream.
Christopher Denison — pianist, composer, librettist and music director



Christopher Donison — pianist, composer, librettist and music director — had long pondered the possibility of musical performances in a gorgeous natural setting that would inspire musicians to new heights of artistry. He'd experienced the uplifting atmosphere of Aspen, Colorado and Banff, Alberta where mighty mountain views invigorate artists' creativity. Looking for the right spot for two decades, he wished for a similar setting on his beloved West Coast where he'd grown up.

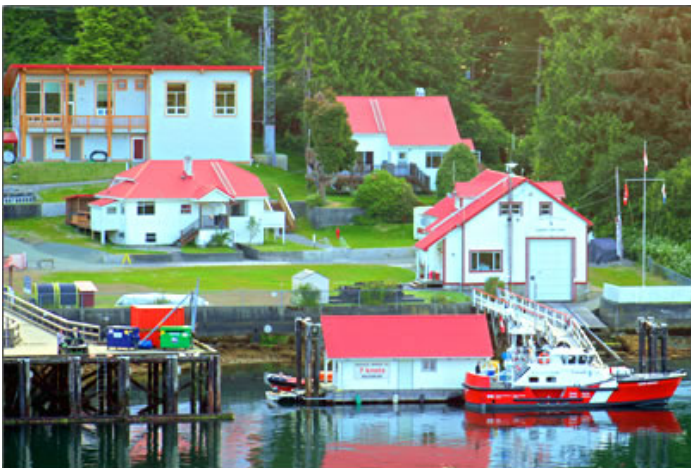
Left: Music by the Sea Artistic Director, Christopher Donison.

Below: View of the Bamfield Marine Science Centre flanked by the Rix Centre for Ocean Discoveries where the festival unfolds.

By chance, Donison mentioned his vision to Victoria, British Columbia architect, Peter de Hoog, while breaking bread at a local pub. Peter revealed he'd just designed such a place in Bamfield with marvelous acoustics and a glass wall with superb views over Barkley Sound and distant mountaintops. A trip to Bamfield's Rix Centre for Ocean Discoveries turned Donison's fantasy into reality and in 2006 he organized his first concerts. Since then, he has worked intensely to expand the program, adding mentoring opportunities for young artists and building the festival's reputation for outstanding performances.



We attended the concerts in the Rix, initially built to bring scientists from around the world to exchange ideas and hone their knowledge in a marine environment. The semi-circular, 140-seat theatre is lit by pale hanging lamps aptly resembling jellyfish. It is crowned by a scallop-shell-shaped roof supported by robust wood beams and posts and a floor-to-ceiling glass wall.



The opening bars of the first concert — on a spectacular Saturday summer night — started across Bamfield Inlet, with the Coast Guard Station setting off a cannon blast. Shawn Spicer, a lone trumpeter, stood up in a rowboat, raised his instrument and played a Donison-composed fanfare, followed by sirens, percussion bells at the Rix and the trumpet responding twice more. Spicer's brassy sounds traveled across the water's flat surface up to its audience hanging over the balcony's balustrade as we watched, listened and applauded.

Donison told me he'd composed the fanfare almost as a lark — a way of getting the show started and stopping the chatter. Instead, the outdoor music-

Canadian Coast Guard Search and Rescue Station.

Artists and Festival Goers Mingle

making has become the series' signature, performed on every opening night and at the last concert.

I met performers — mostly young — from everywhere: Jacob Cordover, an Australian residing in Barcelona, plunked the Beatles' song, *Yesterday*. His Kansas-born spouse, Laura Karney, played Eric Satie's piano pieces on the oboe and opened up a whole new soundscape of notes and flavors. The Ontario-based Silver Birch Quartet played well-known Mozart chamber music, interspersed with atonal pieces by Webern.

I met one of the Quartet violinists, Geoff McCausland, at the Boardwalk Bistro, our favorite watering hole during our Bamfield stay. I told him I struggled to appreciate Webern's 12-tone technique. The young musician looked at me and said, "I'll tell you what I tell my dad. You must give up your conservative ears." I keep remembering those words

as I strive to find beauty in music that normally reminds me of painful dentist visits.

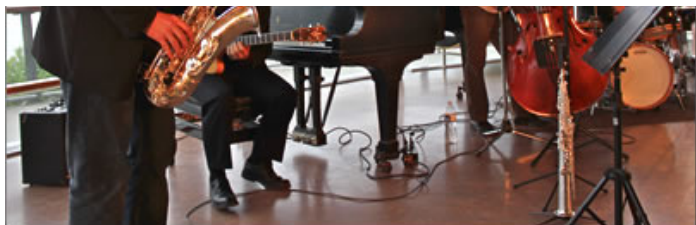


Chris Donnelly and clarinetist Kornel Wolak perform Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue.

Every concert offered classical selections from many periods and countries. Violinist Ernst Kovacic accompanied by Boston-based pianist Marc Ryser delighted us with a Ravel sonata. Music composed 400 years ago by John Dowland was bookended with *Twelve Songs for Guitar* by contemporary Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu. Jazz pianist Chris Donnelly and clarinetist Kornel Wolak not only performed outstanding solos but delighted us with their hammed-up duos and their rendition of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.



Nearly all concerts featured Vancouver's Mike Allen Jazz Quartet playing selections from the great American Songbook, Cole Porter and original compositions. The saxophonist, base player, pianist and drummer performed with such gusto that a two-year-old attending with his parents took off his sandals and launched into a wild dance. And as the



The Mike Allen Jazz Quartet delights the audience.

backdrop to every concert, we enjoyed the Pacific Ocean, the silvery wakes of boats, softening mists, tidal currents, and the setting sun tinting sky and mountains from tangerine to dark purple. One evening, a humpback spouted its own music.

The Village of Bamfield has been Transformed

The village itself has a multi-layered history. Long home to the Huu-ay-aht First Nation local indigenous people, European settlers arrived in the 1850s to farm, log and fish. But in 1902, the village was transformed when it became home to the world's longest stretch of undersea telegraph cable — an 8,000-mile/13,000 kilometer engineering feat laid across the Pacific Ocean seabed — connecting North America to Queensland, Australia. The cable allowed the British Empire to communicate among its dominions around the world until satellites made the cable obsolete. Today, the art-deco building once housing the cable station serves as the Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre, run by a consortium of five Canadian universities. Visitors are welcome.



View of Barkley Sound from the Rix Centre.

Fishing has always been part of the town culture, although commercial vessels have now been replaced by tourism, mainly ocean kayaking among the offshore islands and sports fishing. Expert guides take out visitors from around the world to catch salmon, halibut, snapper and cod.

The town stretches along the east and west shores of the narrow Bamfield Inlet. The western shore — even today only accessible by boat, skiff or water taxi — is flanked by a picturesque wooden boardwalk. The area also hosts hiking trails, walks to great beaches to storm watch in winter or sunset gaze in summer. We met many Bamfielders, who proudly billet the artists in their homes. Truly bringing the community together, they're delighted with the festival and the flair and talent these artists bring to their wild coast.



The Bamfield boardwalk flanks the village's west side.

As the musical week progressed, we noticed changes. The performers began collaborating — a quartet became a quintet. While part of the audience, jazz pianist Donnelly rose spontaneously and joined a group performance. These performers spent more than a week rehearsing and playing and conversing together. "It's a company of artists," said Donison. "There's serendipity and flexibility. There's impromptu. They inspire each other."

The audience also experiences differences from listening to music in a great concert hall or stadium. The

The audience also experiences differences from listening to music in a great concert hall or stadium. The closeness to the performers allows us to savour notes, to see and hear the music in a different way. Feet tap. Smiles abound. Heads bob. We feel the artists' concentration, energy and joy. It's intimate. It's personal. It's superb.

Follow Up Facts



Music by the Sea Festival, www.musicbythesea.ca, is held in July each year, with its musical program finalized by May. The website also lists accommodations and various travel methods for reaching Bamfield by car, seaplane, bus and boat.

From the town of Port Alberni in the middle of Vancouver Island, the passenger and cargo vessel, *M.V. Frances Barkley* serves ports of call between Port Alberni and Bamfield and other Barkley Sound destinations. This schedule includes [day excursions and connections to Bamfield](#).

Bamfield travel information is available on the [Tourism British Columbia](#) website, and on the [Wikipedia](#) website. While visiting the region, plan to explore other popular tourism highlights of [Vancouver Island](#) and [Greater Victoria](#) area on southern Vancouver Island.

Photo: Living for generations in Bamfield, the Phillips family proudly declares their hosting of Festival artists.

Based in Victoria, British Columbia, **Marianne Scott** lives writes for numerous publications in the U.S., Canada and the UK. She also writes as a volunteer for some non-profit organizations. Marianne is the author of **Naturally Salty — Coastal Characters of the Pacific Northwest**, and **Ocean Alexander, the First 25 Years**. Her website is www.saltytales.com.

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