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Wednesday 9.29.2004

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culture: events

The reason for the season

BY ELAINE WOLFF

09/16/2004

The new Fall Art Festivals blooms in the common ground between CVB and OCA

By now, it's not news to *Current* readers that City arts funding for everyone from the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center to the fledgling SA Filmmakers is underwritten by the Hotel Motel Occupancy Tax, aka HOT Tax. It's a small percentage, relatively speaking, of the HOT dime that's devoted to art (roughly 8 percent), but in a city that has faced declines in tourism post 9-11 and increasing demands on its funds, it's still a sore spot for the Greater San Antonio Hotel & Motel Association. The Association periodically pressures everyone from the City Manager on down to strictly interpret language in the HOT tax legislation that requires funds to be spent on activities and programs that overtly promote travel to the Alamo City.

Office of Cultural Affairs director Felix Padrón is as much a supporter of art for art's sake as the next guy, but in his official position he has proved sensitive to the need to secure the city's sole significant supply of public art money. This led to last year's unsuccessful attempt to move Contemporary Arts Month from sweltering July to milder October; the City subsequently withdrew official support of CAM 2004, which nonetheless went off without a hitch under the guidance of Robert Tatum and Anjali Gupta. The motivating factor behind the proposed reschedule was to link CAM with a handful of other established fall events and market the entire series in concert with the Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Although CAM declined to come along, the three-month initiative kicks off this year as the Fall Art Festivals, a tourism magnet of contemporary photography, jazz, accordion music, wine and food, and Day of the Dead activities. OCA, under Padrón's guidance, selected festivals and events that had an established name and audience and were also representative of the city's culture: FotoSeptiembre, the 8-year-old celebration of photography held at galleries and museums across the city, September 1-30; Jazz'S Alive, the two-day live jazz concert in downtown Travis Park, now entering its third decade, September 18-19; the New World Wine & Food Festival, which celebrates vittels and vintages "from Texas to Tierra del Fuego," October 7-10; the International Accordion Festival, which has grown in four years from a modest celebration of music to the last word on the squeezebox, whether your dance of choice is Romany, Tejano, or square in origin, October 16-17; and Día De Los Muertos, music, visual arts, and food events organized for 26 years by Centro Cultural Aztlan in honor of the traditional Mexican celebration of ancestors and the harvest season, taking place throughout November.

A first-year PR and advertising budget of \$100,000, \$70,000 of which came from OCA, is being targeted at the local and "drive" markets in Texas through ads on billboards and in publications such as *Texas Monthly*, *Texas Highways*, and *Spirit*, Southwest Airlines in-flight magazine. Although "it's a little bit too early to tell," if reservations are up, says Padrón, "I think [the Hotel & Motel Association is] very happy. It meets their criteria and objectives for how the money could be used." Not only is October more enticing in San Antonio, it's also the slow season for conventions.

Whether or not it's due to the Fall Art Festivals initiative, Padrón says he thinks he's seen a difference this year at FotoSeptiembre openings. "You begin to see a real healthy turnout ... including more people from outside [the city limits]." If he, and the CVB, are right, the Fall Art Festivals could be one of those much-sought-after win-win situations.

Information on the Fall Art Festivals, including links to participating events and organizations, can be found at www.sanantonio.gov/art/fallart/ •

By Elaine Wolff



Squeezebox king C.J. Chenier is emblematic of the top-notch talent that lights up the stages at La Villita during the International Accordion Festival, October 16-17.



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