

Opinion: Is Calif.'s festival bubble about to burst?

By Joe Mathews

The next bubble to burst in California just might be the festival bubble.

The festival economy is growing so fast that it runs the risk of overheating. Even after expanding from one weekend to two and increasing capacity to 125,000, the Coachella Arts and Music Festival still sold out in just three hours this year. Its cousin, Stagecoach, is the world's biggest country music festival, welcoming 75,000 people annually. And Coachella and Stagecoach have a new spin-off, Arroyo Seco Weekend, debuting this month at the Rose Bowl.

And that's just the big-ticket festivals. This summer, Californians could spend every waking moment attending smaller festivals—hundreds of regional events and thousands of community ones celebrating arts, food or some combination of the two—and still not get to all of them.



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Festivals have long been essential to the California story, from the Monterey International Pop Festival during the Summer of Love, to the 1996 Organic Festival in San Bernardino National Forest, which helped popularize the rave scene. But today, festivals proliferate for very practical reasons: the

promotional needs of many California institutions and communities.

Festivals provide the ready-made audiences that our creative industries use to support artists. Cash-strapped local governments see festivals as relatively cheap economic development tools for creating traffic around sales-tax-producing retail corridors. Regional museums and cultural institutions use festivals to distinguish themselves and draw tourists.

Festivals also fit this cultural moment. Short attention spans require a constant mix of offerings. And given how hard it is to build anything in California, the impermanence of festivals is attractive, as Californians turn away from established institutions in favor of pop-up food and social events. Festivals are designed to be photographed, hash tagged, geotagged, and shared to produce the maximum amount of FOMO among one's friends and followers, who won't get their own chance to attend.

All of which makes festivals both red-hot—and vulnerable. Will the crowds still have the cash for \$5 bottles of water if the state's other bubbles, from housing to technology, burst? Will they tire of waiting on long lines? In an era of skyrocketing land values, will the open spaces hosting these festivals eventually find it more lucrative to house something permanent?

A shakeout may be under way, at least among bigger musical festivals. With so many successful festivals seeking to book the same performers, fees go up, and so do ticket prices. Major festivals in the United Kingdom (widely considered the global leader in musical gatherings) and in places from Oregon (Sasquatch) to Tennessee (Bonnaroo) have seen attendance decline.

Corporate consolidation is another factor to watch. Many of

the bigger music and arts festivals are owned by just a couple of companies, making them vulnerable to shifting economic winds. One of those companies is Goldenvoice, which is responsible for Coachella, Stagecoach and the Arroyo Seco Weekend. Goldenvoice's Paul Tollett has publicly expressed concern about threats to Coachella's future, from terrorism to botulism. "There are big ships that go down over small things. You're riding high, but one wrong thing and you're voted off the island. It's scary," Tollett told the *New Yorker*.

When the shakeout comes to California, which festivals will endure? The fastest-growing events are smaller, boutique gatherings that allow people to immerse themselves in a very particular world for a time. Among these are the High Sierra Music Festival, a family-friendly gathering (entertainment includes a morning kickball game) in tiny Quincy. The West Coast "transformational" festival scene—a movement producing hippie parties with lots of costuming—is strong in California; its crown jewel festival, Lightning in a Bottle, is in tiny Bradley in Monterey County.

The state's best festivals have a strong sense of place. It's hard to imagine signature San Francisco street events like the How Weird Street Faire ever shutting down.

"In a more globalized ethos," says Eamon Armstrong, California-based creative director of Everfest, which produces the Fest300 list of the world's best festivals, "there's a desire to create your own smaller communities and assert your own identity."

California's most enduring festivals have been careful to develop a deep web of ties to their local communities. Take the Monterey Jazz Festival, which has a robust education program. Or the Gilroy Garlic Festival, which supports more than 140 local nonprofits, provides a venue for local performers, offers a college scholarship to the winner of the Miss Gilroy Garlic Festival Queen Pageant, and relies on over

4,000 community volunteers, including high school students who complete their community service requirements by working at the festival.

Sure, you could have seen Lady Gaga at Coachella this year. But she's also playing LA, San Francisco, and Sacramento in August alone. The only place you can find that much garlic is in Gilroy. And the taste stays with you.

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