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Rhythm & Roots revival: How a RI music festival was rescued by a Connecticut producer

Andy Smith Special to The Journal
Published 5:02 a.m. ET Aug. 12, 2022

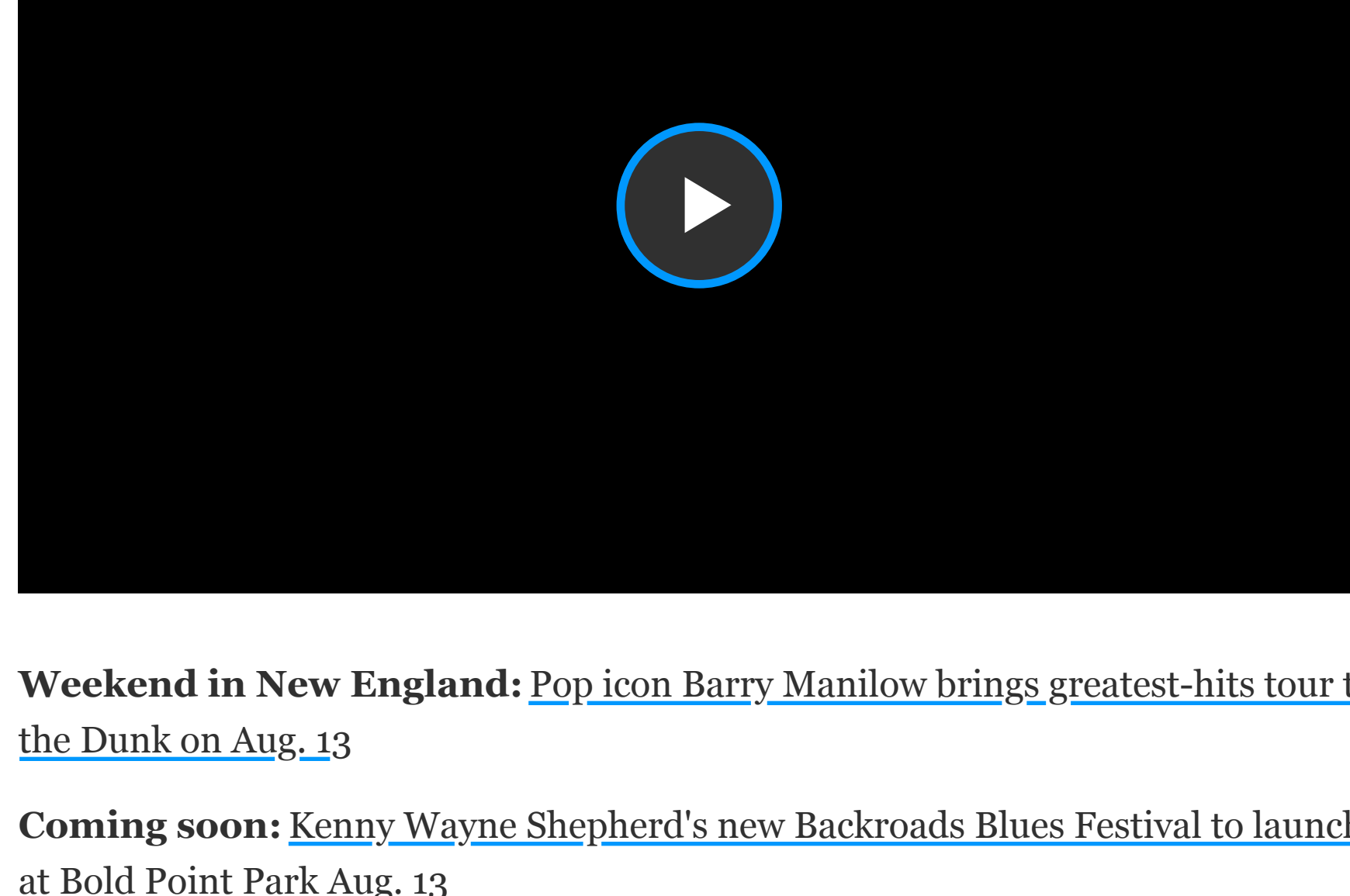
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Area music fans were crestfallen back in February when Chuck Wentworth, longtime producer of the Rhythm & Roots Festival at Ninigret Park in Charlestown, announced he was shutting the event down because of concerns about his health.

Then, in April, a reprieve. A Connecticut production company, [GoodWorks Entertainment](#), announced plans to purchase the festival and keep Wentworth on board as consultant and mentor. Rhythm & Roots, a Labor Day weekend tradition in South County since 1998, would be back.

So what happened?

Wentworth, 71, said the stress from producing last year's festival sent him to the hospital with an irregular heartbeat and blood pressure issues. The doctors told him to cut back on stress, although they didn't say he had to stop working on the festival. So Wentworth started organizing this year's festival, but there were some unexpected issues. The tent company, for example, had gone out of business. The website crashed.



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Ultimately, Wentworth sat down with his family — many of whom are also involved with Rhythm & Roots — and decided the time had come to call it quits.

He said he was gratified by the response from fans, who sent more than a thousand emails and Facebook posts sharing their love for the festival and their sadness that it was ending. And he was surprised when he received about a dozen inquiries from people who wanted to buy Rhythm & Roots and keep it going.

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"About nine of them were from people who just had no clue," Wentworth said. "But after meeting with the folks from GoodWorks, I decided that they were the only ones who had the ability to keep it all alive."

Fans dance to the music under the tent at the 2016 Rhythm & Roots Festival. After a cancellation earlier this year, the festival is back on for Labor Day weekend at Ninigret Park in Charlestown. Glenn Osmundson/The Providence Journal, File

Why did GoodWorks decide to buy Rhythm & Roots?

GoodWorks is a veteran entertainment company based in Hartford. It owns the Infinity Music Halls in Norwalk, Connecticut, and Hartford, and this summer will be presenting Hartford Live, a free summer concert series in the city.

Tyler Grill, CEO and co-founder of GoodWorks, had never been to Rhythm & Roots. But he knows plenty of people who have, and he heard lots of good things.

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Little Feat is among the headliners at this year's festival, which will run Sept. 2-4. Hank Randall

"We did some research on the vibe, what it was like for fans, its reputation in the industry. ... It's considered a gem, a really cool, intimate, community-centered festival," he said.

"Everybody had a story about Rhythm & Roots. Maybe they met their wife there, or a best friend. Or their kids have been going since they were born. It's like a big family reunion."

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Longtime producer will stay on for two years

When GoodWorks met with Wentworth, Grill said, the festival founder wanted to make sure that the right group was going to take over, and that they'd maintain the same warm family atmosphere that fans had grown to love. To help make sure that happens — and to benefit from Wentworth's expertise — he will remain as a consultant for two years.

Grill said if Wentworth wants to stay longer than that, he's certainly welcome.

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Veteran Rhythm & Roots producer Chuck Wentworth had announced in February that he was shutting down the festival due to health concerns. New owner GoodWorks Entertainment will keep him on as a consultant for two years. Mary Marger/The Providence Journal, File

"We'll learn a lot from what he's done and how he's done it," Grill said. "How does he set up the vendors, how does the camping work, the on-site setup. How does he program the bands so there's a good flow to the day. Rhythm & Roots is unique in a lot of ways. The dance tent, for example, is like its own little world. For Chuck this is all second nature. For us it's very new."

Before meeting with GoodWorks, Wentworth said he had no intention of going forward with Rhythm & Roots. He put the equipment in storage, and although his grandchildren offered to take over, they were in their teens and 20s, and Wentworth decided that wasn't a good idea for them.

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Tara Nevein of Donna The Buffalo, one of the familiar acts that will be part of the festival lineup this year. Kate Collins/Black Journal / Via Imagry Content Services, LLC

GoodWorks, he said, provided the right solution.

"The folks at GoodWorks have been great to work with," he said. "They're in the concert business, and they're great at what they do."

Will there be any changes in Rhythm & Roots under its new ownership?

Wentworth said he's never involved in booking the acts, while slowly turning over some of the logistics, such as fencing, toilets and generators, to the newcomers.

Grill said he doesn't anticipate any significant changes to Rhythm & Roots, certainly not this year. Many of the bands who are playing, such as The Pine Leaf Boys and Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys, are Rhythm & Roots veterans.

Festival favorites Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys will be back this year. Scott Clause/USA TODAY Network, File

GoodWorks did not sign the purchase agreement until early May, Grill said.

"We're five months behind our usual schedule," he said. "We can't even think about making changes. We're learning a lot on the fly. Next year we can be a lot more methodical. Maybe after we've been through the process for a couple of years, we'll think about things. But mainly we don't want to disrupt what fans are used to."

The Rhythm & Roots Festival takes place Sept. 2-4 at Ninigret Park in Charlestown. For tickets and information, go to [rhythmandroots.com](#).

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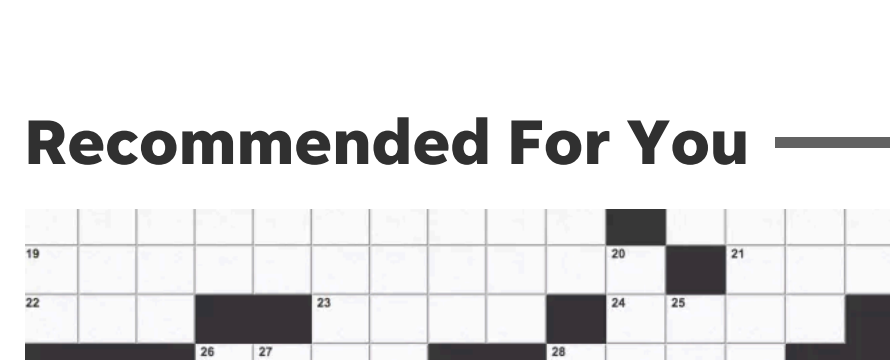


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