



FESTIVALS

# Stern Grove Festival canceled for first time in long history amid coronavirus concerns



Joshua Kosman | May 14, 2020



The San Francisco Ballet performs during the Stern Grove Festival in San Francisco on July 26, 2015. Photo: Santiago Mejia, Special to the Chronicle



the latest in a long series of cultural activities to fall prey to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The 83rd season of the festival, located in Sigmund Stern Grove, was scheduled for June 14 through Aug. 16, with a starry lineup of performers that included Macy Gray, Billy Ray Cyrus, **Tower of Power**, the San Francisco Symphony, the San Francisco Ballet and Jimmy Cliff.

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In place of the planned live performances, the festival plans to offer “Best of the Fest,” a weekly series of online videos culled from archives of the festival’s past 13 years, festival officials announced Thursday, May 14. Among the highlights are recent performances by Sheila E., Pink Martini, the Doobie Brothers and George Clinton.

“We had been trying to hold out as long as we possibly could, but it’s clear that mass gatherings are not going to be permitted in San Francisco anytime soon,” Executive Director Bob Fiedler told The Chronicle in a phone interview. “So we’ve come to the unfortunate conclusion that we have no choice but to cancel.”

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The cancellation was particularly dismaying because the performing lineup for 2020, which also included such acts as **Tank and the Bangas**, Hanson, **Animal Collective** and **Cuco**, was the strongest in recent history, Fiedler said. The organization had projected a weekly turnout of 75,000 people due to the greater star power, compared with an average of 60,000 to 70,000 attendees in recent seasons.

“We often feel proud of what we’re able to deliver, but this season we had planned to spend more money on artists’ fees and include a few bigger names than what we usually get,” Fiedler said.

That’s because the 2020 season was slated to be the first since **Douglas Goldman**, who spent 24 years as the festival’s CEO and board chair, passed the reins to his twin sons,



Stern Grove Festival Association Executive Director Bob Fiedler (left), then-SGFA Chairman/CEO Dr. Douglas E. Goldman, S.F. Mayor London Breed, SGFA Treasurer Jason Goldman and SGFA Vice Chairman Matthew Goldman.

Photo: Drew Altizer

“We’re disappointed, naturally,” Matthew Goldman told The Chronicle. “We had been planning – well, not a departure, but a new type of energy around the programming. This isn’t the memorable beginning we’d been anticipating.”

The “juiced-up” season had come with an increased expenditure on artists’ fees, to the tune of 15% to 20%, Fiedler said, which means that the financial hit from the cancellation is expected to be “significant.”

“We’ll be losing out on well over \$1 million in revenue, sponsorships and donations,” he continued. “All the people who turn out and put a few bucks into a bucket – that’s one of the things that keep us going.”



The Isley Brothers brought their 60th anniversary tour to Stern Grove Festival's closing concert last August in front of a capacity crowd.  
Photo: Scott Wall

“Best of the Fest” promises to include not only archival performance footage but also artist interviews, footage of the Grove and appearances by surprise guests still to be announced. The videos will be available each Sunday on the Festival’s **website**, **YouTube channel** and **Facebook page**.

The festival had expected 3,000 children to participate in its free music Education & Outreach programs and summer camps, which have been also canceled. Instead, Stern Grove plans to offer online classes in music-making and dance on its YouTube and Facebook channels.



expanse surrounded by eucalyptus trees, is an ideal setting for musical performances of all kinds.

The Goldman twins, 34, represent the fifth generation of the family to head the organization. Their great-great-grandmother, Rosalie Meyer Stern, bought the site in 1931, named it after her husband and gifted it to the city for use as a performance venue.

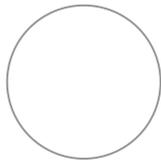


Pete Seeger performs at the Stern Grove Festival in San Francisco on Oct. 26, 1980.  
Photo: Chronicle archives

The organization's plans for keeping patrons engaged this summer virtually could turn into new programming initiatives for the future.

"We're not actively planning for 2021 at the moment – we obviously have a lot of lead time – but as we think about ways to create a virtual season now," Matthew Goldman said, "we're also looking for ways to repurpose the resources we have."

"It's not that we're trying to abandon anything we've done before. But as my brother and I take on a new era, we're looking for ways that we can come back stronger than ever."



**Joshua Kosman**

Joshua Kosman is The San Francisco Chronicle's music critic. Email: [jkosman@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jkosman@sfchronicle.com)  
Twitter: [@JoshuaKosman](https://twitter.com/JoshuaKosman)

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