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The Bayou Show — Get a good look at it. It may be very different, if it exists at all, next year.

The Houston Festival could look very different in 1987.

by **JANE LUDLAM**

Since its inception the Houston Festival has celebrated the arts indigenous to Houston, introducing the city's denizens and sometimes the world to Houston's hard-working, creative nobodies. Ironically, because of the bang-up success of this year's Houston Festival and its sesquicentennial events—Jean-Michel Jarre's "Rendezvous Houston" and New Music America '86—the festival's paid artistic positions have been eliminated, leaving the future of the grass-roots programs for 1987 in question.

The Houston Festival ran over budget this year. The new executive director, Jim Austin, says the exact figures aren't in yet, but others report that if the Jarre event had not happened, the Houston Festival would be $50,000 in the black. $140,000 of Festival money was spent on the laser and music spectacular at the last minute. The Houston Festival had not planned to spend *any* money on that $2.3 million extravaganza which wowed Houstonians but received little attention elsewhere.

Not only that, but the teeming hordes that gridlocked downtown that night galled the big wheels in Houston's performing arts world. In interviews with past and present Houston Festival officials, these organizations were repeatedly called "the Big Five": the Society for the Performing Arts, the Alley Theatre, Houston Grand Opera, the Houston Ballet and the Houston Symphony Orchestra. According to a story published in the Houston Chronicle earlier this summer, these institutions balked at the fact that they did not learn of the Jarre concert until six weeks before it occurred. It is reported however, that the Big Five were informed in January of the April 5 event at a meeting of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston (CACH), the organization which provides major funding for the Big Five and the Houston Festival. The major institutions probably didn't grasp the scale of the concert or believe that it would actually happen until six weeks before it did. At any rate, they were peeved that their ticket holders could not get to concert halls downtown that sole night of the year.

As the populace amassed west of downtown in previously unheard-of numbers (probably inflated estimate: 1.3 million), a cultural event was being realized without the Big Five's participation, much less their control. They were losing money on their performances that night which had been scheduled for no telling how long. Apparently, large art bureaucracies do not cotton to spontaneity.

When the traffic jams and beer cans had been cleared, the Big Five flexed their collective muscle, and, presto, Rochella Cooper, Houston Festival Executive Director since 1979, had resigned, Jim Austin was hired to replace her, and the festival had a new emphasis: in Austin's word's, "to work with the majors," the Big Five, as well as Theatre Under the Stars. The visual arts may join the fray as Austin seeks to work with the Museum of Fine Arts, the Contemporary Arts Museum, and the Menil Foundation. The Houston Pops and the Museum of Natural Science can't be far behind.

CACH and its Major Institutions Allocations Panel agreed that Houston Festival funding should be stopped, according to the Chronicle, until the festival demonstrated that it would no longer "interfere" with other arts organizations and would improve its management and planning. The 11 major arts organizations receive 75 percent (this fiscal year, $1,329,474) of CACH funds with the remaining 25 percent going to about 200 smaller arts groups. The Houston Festival is budgeted to receive $70,500 this year.

When ex-director Rochella Cooper explained why she resigned, she said, "I had completed the work in seven years that I came to do, and I'm moving on." She stated that she was "definitely not" responding to pressure. Cooper is a flutist and fiber artist and filled the festival's paid staff positions with artists.

The Houston Festival under Jim Austin is looking for a marketing director to replace former Performing Arts Manager Jerry McCathern (a musician), whose position was terminated. McCathern had managed the performing arts, literary and media arts panels. With the help of volunteers from the artists community, he implemented the programs on stages scattered through downtown parks, the readings by Houston writers at the Museum of Fine Arts and Munchies Cafe, and the Houston Festival poster competition.

"I was hired to streamline, professionalize, the operation," says Jim Austin. "The Houston Festival is looking

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to increase its marketing level, not only to locals but to tourists and to major dailies nationwide." Austin, formerly the director of Memphis in May International Festival, has a vision for 1987's Houston Festival: to *work with* the Big Five, since their services can't be purchased at this time, uniting the Festival with the major arts organizations under the umbrella of a theme. "Suppose our theme is 'World Friendship,'" he conjectures, and goes on to draw a picture of, say, the Houston Symphony Orchestra performing Dvorak's *New World Symphony* in Jones Hall. Austin has only been in Houston for about four weeks, and so far the symphony is the only Big Five organization that he has worked with directly. "Our mission is to sell Houston—to use the vehicle of the arts to do that. Not only zydeco, Tex-Mex music, jazz and rock, but ballet, classical music—the fine arts."

The artistic personnel of past festivals also had a vision. Theirs was to provide funds and a popular venue for performers, writers, sculptors, painters and interdisciplinary artists of merit whose work tested the waters, with an emphasis on those from Houston. They imagined an amalgam of daring work that would stand up to criticism, reflect the city's personality, and "sell Houston" in the process. With the paid artistic staff positions eradicated, that continuity of vision may remain only in the volunteer artists who sit on panels that choose the work to be presented. However, these committees may be short-lived too.

Jerry McCathern feels that the elimination of artistic personnel poses a serious threat to existing arts programs. These are the Bayou Show (the installations of site-specific sculptures along Buffalo Bayou), interdisciplinary arts projects, the literary competition "Words Alive!" and the Houston Festival poster competition. If these programs do bite the proverbial dust, the festival would consist of performing arts on outdoor stages and the crafts and arts booths.

"My feeling," McCathern says, "is that the Houston Festival board of directors and the new director are proclaiming an image of high arts, but there's no substance to it. They're using it as an excuse to dump programs we've built up over the years. [Those programs] are in jeopardy and will probably be eliminated."

On the other hand, Jim Austin says that economically the festival is doing fine, though its sesquicentennial events did have problems. Austin plans to "expand the visual arts program," and says that it will be "upgraded, though we don't have the plan together yet." He says, "the literary arts program will continue, though how it's going to continue is unknown." He speaks of "leveraging corporate support with the visual arts organizations."

The competition for writers is closest to Austin's heart because of his background (doctorate in philosophy, Oxford, 1980), and he would like to see the winning pieces published in an independent compilation. As for the Bayou Show, Austin says that it has been "nice, but not significant enough." The sculpture exhibition has always included the works of at least two Houston artists. "It's a wonderful point of departure, and it lends credibility to the festival." However, artist Fletcher Mackey's position managing the Bayou Show is apparently up in the air. He is contracted on a seasonal basis, and Austin said flatly that it is unknown if he's going to continue. Mackey could not be reached for comment.

In the genre of interdisciplinary art, Houstonian Michael Galbreth's "The Human Tour" is definitely on the schedule for Houston Festival '87. Galbreth has created a trip through the city's streets, which if viewed from above would draw a human figure on the map. "The Human Tour" incorporates video and an exhibition at Diverse Works gallery. Galbreth set the funding wheels in motion for his project last year and received a $5,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant. The Texas Commission for the Arts recently awarded matching funds for the work. The project will not cost the Houston Festival anything, and Galbreth says that the festival cannot promise to include "The Human Tour" in its catalog or provide publicity.

As the Big Five and other arts organizations diligently work to raise funds in an economically depressed city, the Houston Festival's brand new director corrals his marketing staff and tries to get a handle on the arts in Houston. The major art institutions have their spring programs set in stone by now. Houstonians may be facing a celebration of the same sure-shot, money-making programs, forced into a theme, that the Big Five bring them year round. And talking with Jim Austin, one has no doubt that he is just the man to make sure the Houston Festival runs efficiently and doesn't, for ten days out of the year, steal the thunder from the powers that be.