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Mount Vernon music festival aims to educate, entertain

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MOUNT VERNON - A spring music festival will aim not just to entertain but to inspire listeners to pick up an instrument, organizers say.

The Triple Hill Music Festival is being organized with help from a \$115,000 grant from the state Music Fund - the money collected under a legal settlement reached after a probe into "payola" schemes between major record labels and radio stations.

Mount Vernon resident Donna Jackson, the festival's creative director, said the three-month music series will present everything from Brazilian samba to the blues.

"It involves the participant in the music," Jackson said. "Hopefully that will leave a lasting impression with them, and they'll seek out some classes. Maybe this will inspire certain musicians to give lessons."

Jackson said she approached the Westchester Arts Council with the idea for the festival in March, and the grant was awarded to the council last month.

A Mount Vernon resident for more than 30 years, she remembers a time when music and the arts had more venues in town.

The festival is meant to address that void.

Musicians so far include bluesman Guy Davis, whose parents, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, lived in the city; LaChanze, a resident who stars in Broadway's "The Color Purple"; folk guitarist KJ Denhart of Ossining; recording artist Kirk Franklin; and Samba NY.

Samba musician Philip Galinsky, for example, will offer hands-on after-school and community workshops in drumming, Jackson said.

Along with the Dole Center and the Association of Community Based Artists of Westchester, the festival will look at alternative venues such as the high school and the steps of City Hall, she said.

The centerpiece will be an art exhibit, "Rock My Soul," commissioned by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, to be displayed at the Mount Vernon Public Library from April to June.

The public library, school district, city government and Fleetwood Neighborhood Association are among the community agencies taking part.

"We have so much culture in Westchester County, and we need to bring more of it into Mount Vernon," Recreation Commissioner Karen Watts said. "We're culture-rich here, but we don't have the activities, the variety of music and things coming into the community."

"I couldn't be more excited to have a program like this of this magnitude coming into Mount Vernon. We're just so ready for it. The issue has been to bring it in a format that not only entertains, but educates."

The festival's name, "Triple Hill," refers to the three hills in Mount Vernon's city seal.

According to the city's Web site, the seal was introduced in 1892 and depicted what were then considered the highest points in Mount Vernon: Trinity Place near Fourth Street, Vista Place at Barnes Avenue, and North 10th Street between Washington and Jefferson places.

Since then, it was discovered that the city's highest elevation is on North Columbus Avenue at the Bronxville line.
