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New Orleans Jazz Fest Gentilly Stage manager Greg Miller is living the dream

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Greg Miller, Gentilly Stage manager for the past seven years, waits to change sets from Charmaine Neville to Luther Kent at the New Orleans Jazz Fest. (Photo by David Grunfeld, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)

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You have probably seen Greg Miller more times on the New Orleans Jazz Fest's Gentilly Stage than any single musician who has performed there. He is not as famous, as say Lady Gaga, who performed on his stage with Tony Bennett last Sunday. But like her, Miller is a very visible presence, even if you only see him directing his crew and helping move equipment between acts.

Thirty-five bands, five a day over seven days is what Miller is managing during the 2015 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, presented by Shell.

His day can start with an up-and-coming band, and end with a superstar. His day can also start sunny and end with lightening and rain. With thousands of dollars of equipment, much of it electrical, onstage, as well as his crew and the band, there is a lot to be concerned about. (When it rains, he said, "We do a lot of mopping.")

It's like much like being the captain of a ship, but changing ships and some of the crew every few hours, sometimes during stormy seas, while keeping everything afloat.

Jazz Fest stage managers tell all ... sort of

Miller, based in Suffern, N.Y., has been the Gentilly Stage manager for seven years. It is the only stage that he has managed for Jazz Fest. A producer, audio engineer, and stage manager for other festivals and events, Miller's schedule outside of the festival is enviable.

Miller, 46, didn't start as a stage manager at Jazz Fest.

"My first job was in the backline department moving amps, drum kits, etcetera, from stage to stage," Miller said. "A spot opened up for stage manager and I got the job."

He did that for a year before he moved into the stage manager position.

"I got very lucky," he said.

"The stage manager is responsible for everything that happens on the stage from keeping the stage running on time to accommodating the band's needs," Miller said.

Miller's day starts at 7 a.m., when the day's headliner loads in his or her equipment at 8 a.m. After that, Miller and his crew set up for the

first act.

"It's a big game of Tetris moving all these bands around," Miller said. Typically each festival workday lasts 13 hours.

His crew consists of about 20 to 25 people, including stagehands, audio, video, security, backstage managers and catering. "It takes a lot of people to keep this stage running smoothly," Miller said.

His pet peeve? "Bands that don't have it together," he said. "This is a huge opportunity for any band. I had one band that couldn't operate their own equipment. If you get this gig, you should show up prepared and be professional."

At the end of the day, Miller is a fan of the festival, the music and jazz festers.

"It's still a really happy discovery of great music for me. I learn something new every year," he said. "What makes the Gentilly Stage special is the diversity in both music and the level of talent. We start our day with local musicians and end our day with national acts. It's quite a musical journey for the audience."

He echoes the same sentiment about Jazz Fest.

"Walking though the grounds, you can hear almost every genre of music. This place is pretty special."

"There are times I can't believe I even get to be here," Miller said. "I've gotten to work with and meet two of my musical heroes, Jeff Beck and Robert Plant, both whom headlined my stage."

"When you're a kid, this is kind of thing you dream of, and now I get to do it for a living. I'm deeply grateful I get to do this at Jazz Fest."

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