



## Through the Lens of Community: An Annotated Photo Essay of the 2025 Ballydehob Jazz Festival

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The idyllic environment of Ballydehob (Gaeilge: *Béal Átha an Dá Chab*, meaning ‘mouth of the two river fords’), West Cork is the unlikely setting for one of Ireland’s most notable jazz festivals. And the Ballydehob Jazz Festival (BJF) is almost certainly the quirkiest. This tiny and quite lovely village stands on Roaringwater Bay on the Wild Atlantic Way and at the gateway to the Mizen Peninsula. Actors, Jeremy Irons and Sinéad Cusack look on from the towering splendour of Kilcoe Castle. The festival was started by local resident, John Fagan, in 2007, but in more recent times has come under the stewardship of Caroline and Joe O’Leary and a team of amazing community volunteers. The O’ Leary’s run Levis Corner House, a landmark pub and shop on Main Street. Regular gigs are hosted at Levis throughout the year. The couple have deep roots with the music industry and Joe was formerly frontman for the Cork Indie band, Fred.

The festival, now held annually on the May Bank Holiday weekend, has grown to become a milestone event on the Irish popular music landscape and as depicted in the photographs, provides a showcase for national and international jazz. The philosophy underpinning the festival is in part a response to the fractured nature of world politics. Joe O’Leary’s view is that:

With everything going on globally — cruelty, oppression, negativity — it feels more important than ever to gather, celebrate, and share joy. This festival is about freedom of expression, community, and making magic together.<sup>1</sup>

What is strikingly evident is a community effort, catalysed by music, that reflects Joe and Caroline’s vision of humanity that is peaceful,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ballydehobjazzfestival.org/about/>.

respectful and inclusive. But that is the BJF's charm. What is presented is excellent grass roots music that is accessible and fun. The event peaks with a New Orleans funeral style parade on late Sunday afternoon. There are huge ghostly, fantastical puppets, a marching band and every kind of flamboyant costume imaginable. Also, a coffin carried by some scary voodoo/zombie types and led by a spine-chilling marshal. A more eccentric shindig in all of Ireland is hard to imagine and it is tempting to speculate that the voodoo reference is poking fun at the church-led anti-jazz movement of the 1930s.



This scary, spine-chilling marshal leads the New Orleans-style funeral parade for the festival's climax.



Magnificent ghostly puppets and fantastical animals feature in the event's famous New Orleans style funeral parade. Surely the most quirky and fun festival ever!



The horn section of Montpelier-based, Canibal Dandies, power the parade.



The Canibal Dandies drummers provide the beat.



Eccentric revellers.



Room with a view.



London resident, Leonie Evans delivers a set of jazz-influenced, unique, self-penned songs.



Benji Bower, together with his Terra Collective Orchestra present a fabulous concert of jazz-inspired ambient art music.



The iconic twelve-arched railway viaduct crosses the River Bawnakeane at Ballydehob, West Cork. Literal reflections in a serene environment.