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guitarfest

HARMONIC CHORDS

30 events over the next
4 weeks makes
N.Y. gathering a top pick
for music fans

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String theory

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THE NEW YORK GUITAR FESTIVAL began in 1999, with three concerts at Merkin Concert Hall.

"It was just a little series," says co-founder and artistic director David Spelman. "They called it a festival, but that was a misnomer, in a way."

This annual event has grown steadily. By now, "festival" couldn't be less of a misnomer.

This year's edition, which runs from Saturday to Feb. 8, will feature scores of guitarists at 30 events in 11 venues throughout New York.

"Each year I tell myself this is as big as it should get — small is beautiful," says Spelman, who lives in New York and Ocean Grove. "We're not trying to be Lollapalooza or something. But each year, more ideas come along, and other venues say 'We'd love to do a couple of things with you,' and a little more funding arrives."

"I think this was attributed to Mae West, but I'll use it: 'Too much of a good thing is wonderful.'"

Among this year's major events are a

New York Guitar Festival experiences spectacular growth in just 7 years

Spanish guitar marathon; a tribute to Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska" album; a series of blues shows honoring the work of Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James, Charley Patton and Elizabeth Cotten; premieres of film scores by Leni Stern and Henry Kaiser; and a concert headlined by country-bluegrass star Ricky Skaggs.

Venues range from theaters (Merkin, the Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall) to nightclubs (the B.B. King Blues Club & Grill, Joe's Pub), while workshops will be presented at the Apple Store in Soho.

Multicultural and forward-looking, the festival will offer an abundance of world-music masters and technological innovators. The Toubab Krewe plays Malian-influenced "Afro-cowboy-ninja-surf" music, while Andre LaFosse, who performs in a style he calls "turntablist guitar," uses loops to create a dense, funky sound.

"There are two sides to it," says Spelman. "One is, like George Steinbrenner: 'Let's get fannies in the

seats.' If we have 180 seats to fill at Joe's Pub or 1,000 at the 92nd Street Y, we've got to make sure that there's one artist on the bill that will get some people in there. But once you have people in the tent, you can start preaching to them."

"Our attitude is, we would really be disappointed in ourselves if somebody came away and didn't at least discover one new artist. Sometimes, frankly, we want to expose someone to a whole new genre."

Or a new instrument. Though this is a guitar festival, many other guitar-like instruments will be featured. Marco Cappelli will play a 14-string guitar he devised himself. Harry Manx will play an Indian instrument, the *Mohan veena*, at the Charley Patton tribute. Past festival shows have showcased instruments like the Chinese *pipa*, the African *kora* and the Middle Eastern *oud*.

"We've had all of those instruments on programs where most of the audience didn't come to hear Middle Eastern or

African music, but we found a way to sort of insinuate those things into a program's concept," says Spelman.

Spelman, who also organizes festivals in other cities, co-founded the festival with John Schaefer, host of the midday "New Sounds" show on New York public radio station WNYC (93.9 FM). The festival has issued its own series of CDs devoted to guitar music, called "Guitar Harvest," and donates money to support music education in New York public schools.

Spelman, a classically trained guitarist, conceives and books many of the events himself. Sometimes, though, he simply agrees to co-sponsor a show that has already been planned. Unlike most other music festivals, there is no central venue, and no discounts for people who attend multiple events.

"Unfortunately, there just hasn't been a mechanism for doing that," says Spelman. "It's like, everyone's on different cycles. Carnegie Hall, for instance, is very subscription-based; they sell their tickets far in advance. Then places like Joe's Pub, they don't even book their shows until three months ahead."