

Casting the net wide

The burgeoning festival scene is breeding as many diverse events as specialised ones, such as this year's Sun Festival being headlined by David Foster.

CHRISTOPHER LIM finds out why

A PERENNIAL question for festivals and large events here is how narrowly to focus their programmes. Curiously, many have opted for a broad sweep, which flies in the face of the conventional wisdom that mature and crowded markets encourage specialisation.

The most obvious example of this is the Singapore Sun Festival, which is now in its fourth year. Since its inception, it has organised itself around the amorphous theme of "the art of living well", which encompasses everything from gastronomy and literature to music and wellness, but has frustrated the efforts of some people to pin down what exactly it's all about.

Casting the festival's net wide has obviously paid off for organisers IMG Artists, however, because last year's attendance of 60,000 was double that of the festival's debut in 2007. And IMG hopes the number will grow by another 20 per cent this year, according to Mindy Coppin, executive producer of the Singapore Sun Festival.

UBS has also given the Sun Festival a vote of confidence as the event's presenting sponsor, which must have helped with this year's festival budget that's in excess of \$3 million.

One of the reasons the Sun Festival's approach works is that it was the first festival here to have both a broad scope and big budget. It clinched a first-mover advantage and has hung on to it. The result is that the Sun Festival doesn't have to compete directly against more focused rivals.

One might surmise that another reason for the Sun Festival's wide-ranging programme is Singapore's small domestic market, which could mean that our niche audiences are too small to support niche events, but Ms Coppin says the festival targets both local and regional audiences, which bypasses the issue of market size.

"The demographic hasn't changed from our original target but it certainly has expanded," says Ms Coppin.

While few other festivals here have themes as vague as the Sun Festival's, many are almost as diverse in spite of revolving around themes of dance, countries, motorsports and wine.

Driven by culture

Take the inaugural Laberinto, Flamenco Festival, for example. Flamenco dancer and choreographer Antonio Vargas is organising Singapore's first Flamenco Festival, which will be held on Oct 23-24.

But it will be about more than just dance. "Apart from Flamenco dance, we are including the integration of other ethnic forms and making things entertaining by having other artisans like arts and crafts with pottery, artwork, wine and gastronomy," says Vargas, 69, who has been based in Singapore for the past five years, together with his family. "We also have roving artists on stilts to create a festival atmosphere," he adds.

Why not create a more focused statement for Laberinto's debut? Vargas says Flamenco has broad cultural roots that range from India to jazz, and that a proper introduction to it should encompass the breadth of these influences.

Suntec approached Vargas to create a festival at Chimes, which it owns, and offered \$70,000 of funding, which accounts for almost half of the festival's estimated \$150,000 budget.

"Suntec's sponsorship allows us to make the fringe events free so that we can involve the wider community including children and students rather than just appealing to dance aficionados who can afford tickets," says Vargas, who adds that he hopes to make the annual festival even bigger next year. He also intends to time it to coincide with the Spanish Semana Santa holy week in order to broaden the festival's theme even further to encompass Spanish culture in general.

Of course, there are already a few country-themed festivals such as the annual VOILAH! French Festival, which started in 2007 but skipped 2008. Rather than just focusing on one aspect of French culture, it runs the gamut in order to reach out to as wide an audience as possible.

"It showcases various aspects of French culture, as different audiences may enjoy different aspects of French culture, from film to food, from performing arts to visual arts, and from literature to sports," says Raphael Millet, director of business development and international projects for Phish Communications, which manages the festival on behalf of the organiser, the French Embassy.

This comprehensive approach has paid off judging by attendance figures, which have gone up every year and reached a total of 36,866 this year from April 15 to May 21. VOILAH! will be returning next year, and while the programme hasn't been announced yet, Mr Millet confirms that the programme will again be extremely varied.

Selling an experience

In the food-and-beverage sector, The Singapore Straits Wine Company's Wine Fiesta, held annually at Duxton Hill, has always been about more than just wine consumption since it started in 2008.

"Rather than being just a wine tasting, we want to build on a wine lifestyle," says Kathy Lim-Sheehy, chief executive of The Straits Wine Company. "It's all part of an experience, and the food, the education, the wine, and the shopping come together for an enjoyable evening in great company."

Part of Ms Lim-Sheehy's definition of "great company" is family. Many of The Straits Wine Company's customers are young parents, which is why the Wine Fiesta also has children's activities so that parents can enjoy a leisurely afternoon of wine without neglecting family.

Rather than diluting its focus, Wine Fiesta's broad scope actually helps to break down barriers that can prevent wine from being approachable. "The extra elements serve to enhance the fiesta, show different aspects of wine



FILE PHOTO



Festive scene: (Clockwise from left) Flamenco dancer and choreographer Antonio Vargas (seen here with his Singaporean wife Daphne Huang) who will be organising Singapore's first Laberinto, Flamenco Festival on Oct 23-24, and Singapore Sun Festival 2010 participants tenor Jose Carreras, yoga instructor Saumik Bera, author/writer Tishani Doshi and chef Carlo Cracco. The Sun Festival has since its inception organised itself around the amorphous theme of "the art of living well"



enjoyment and help break out of the sit-down-fine-dining stereotype that wine has gained for itself here," says Ms Lim-Sheehy.

But the core of Wine Fiesta remains wine, wine tasting and meeting winemakers, and every auxiliary activity directly or indirectly supports the primary product.

With all of this in mind, the goal for Wine Fiesta this year is to increase attendance by half over last year's 3,000.

Making a niche accessible

The Formula One Singapore Grand Prix probably has the clearest theme in this round-up of festivals and large event, but it's also got a large number of events revolving around it that have nothing to do with motorsports.

All this diversity combined makes the event more accessible, because not everyone who watches the Singapore GP or participates in F1-related activities is an F1 fan. The goal is to appeal to "even those who only have a

passing interest in Formula One", according to Sarah Martin, director of operations for the Singapore GP.

"We are ultimately a lifestyle event, woven into the world's only Formula One night race," says Ms Martin. "As an international event attracting visitors from Australia to Mozambique, it is important to offer a diverse programme to cater to as wide an audience as possible," she adds.

Music's been a key part of the Singapore GP's entertainment and this year's season runs from Sept 17 to 26. In addition to various clubbing events, there will be 10 concert stages placed in various positions along the track.

The biggest names, international headliners Mariah Carey, Missy Elliott, Adam Lambert and Daughtry, will be performing at the Padang in full view of any ticket holder who wants to attend the gigs.

Ultimately, it looks like for successful festivals which create a buzz, one needs an anchor (event), but the net is cast wide to haul in the crowd.



Wine Fiesta: Where food, education, wine and shopping come together for an enjoyable evening "in great company"

Concerned about the end of an era

THERE'S a reason David Foster's current tour is called *Hitman*. Few figures embody the traditional music industry like he does. As a prolific producer and songwriter, he helped to create it, and in those same capacities, and as a performer, he has also been shaped by it.

So when Foster predicts that within five years CDs will be free and given away at concerts, his words carry some weight.

"It's something that makes me concerned because I'm not sure what this means for the future of the music industry, but it's pretty clear that it's going to happen," Foster said over the phone from Malibu, California.

A consequence of his bleak but pragmatic assessment of the future of CD sales is his belief in the future of live performances, which is why he will be performing in Singapore next month (on the keyboards) for the first time in 16 years when he headlines the opening gala concerts of the Singapore Sun Festival on Oct 29-30, together with friends like Peter Cetera and Natalie Cole.

The gig are part of his *Hitman: David Foster & Friends* tour, which has been captured and released on both CD and DVD, and Foster says that the Singaporean gig will be very similar to the recorded version. That also means he will be bringing his latest discovery here, 18-year-old Filipino singer Charice - who represents Foster's long-running search for new talent and his belief in Asian artists.

"I've said before that I wouldn't be surprised if the next big star came from Asia, and I think Asian stars have come into their own and aren't just copying American or European stars any more," says Foster, although he thinks Asians will still have to sing in English if they want to break into the large American and British music markets.

Spotting talent has never been Foster's problem. He saw the spark of greatness in Celine Dion and Michael Bu-



Foster: Points to subscription-based models as a potential way to replace falling revenue from CD sales

ble when no one else could. What worries him is the erosion of the industry infrastructure that has traditionally helped talents get their music to the market.

"If someone has an idea for an album in future, how will he find an engineer to record it, or a producer to produce or market it, if there's no way to pay for these things?" Foster asks. Even YouTube discoveries need producers like him to develop their careers and bring them onto the international stage, he adds.

Although Foster's concerns don't ring true for the many indie artists who now record and produce entire albums on cheap home PCs, it's hard to refute his argument that the traditional route to stardom is in jeopardy.

After all, Foster collaborators like Air Supply, Chicago, Andrea Bocelli, Natalie Cole and Josh Groban would probably have had very different careers without Foster - and the industry he represents - behind them.

Still, Foster remains optimistic that the music industry as he knows it will find a way to survive, and he points to subscription-based models - such as SingTel's AMPed service - as a potential way to replace falling revenue from CD sales.

"Charging people a few dollars a month in their cell-phone bills to listen to as much music as they want could be the best way to listen to music in future while still giving artists a way to make money and continue to make music," he says.

If you would kill to be talent-spotted by Foster, buy tickets for his Sun Festival concerts because he's going to randomly pick an audience member to sing on each night. It's always been Foster's style to travel around and give people a chance to shine. He says that he's "often found that when you give people a chance to sing, they've got all this music stored up inside just waiting to burst out, and it can be really wonderful to see".

By CHRISTOPHER LIM