



★ *New York City* FRIDAY, JUNE 10, 8:00

Jazz pianist **Bill Charlap** leads an all-star ensemble featuring vocalist **Kurt Elling** to explore the Roaring Twenties through be-bop. In the second half of the program, accomplished singer-songwriter **Suzanne Vega** celebrates the folk music scene of the 1950s, '60s, and beyond with **Tom Paxton** and **Richard Julian**.



AN INSIDE LOOK AT UNITED SOUNDS OF AMERICA

Co-producer Danny Melnick reveals the behind-the-scenes planning for this spectacular June series

By Maggie Berndt



★ *Route 66* SATURDAY, JUNE 11, 8:00

Directed by legendary folk singer **Arlo Guthrie** and featuring **Vance Gilbert**, **Eliza Gilkyson**, and **Chris Smither**, this performance showcases nostalgic songs inspired by America's "Mother Road."

This summer, *Symphony Center Presents* and *Absolutely Live Entertainment* present *United Sounds of America*. Six one-of-a-kind concerts—June 10–12 and 16–18—highlight a different iconic location of America’s diverse musical landscape: New York, Route 66, New Orleans, Memphis, Detroit, and Austin.

Danny Melnick of *Absolutely Live Entertainment* came up with the idea for the series after being approached at a conference in January 2010 by Jim Fahey, director of *Symphony Center Presents*, who was looking for an opportunity to collaborate.

Fahey had been given the opportunity to create a series of special concerts to end the 2010–11 season. He hoped to build these around American music from different cities and regions, particularly to celebrate Route 66, which begins just around the corner from Symphony Center at Michigan and Adams.

Additionally, both Fahey and Melnick were concerned about the extreme political divisiveness on display at the time over health care reform

and other issues, and they viewed these concerts as a way to celebrate America’s musical diversity.

They both wanted to capture the essence of American music as “the great glue that affects all of us on a global level.” And they were further inspired by Chicago itself as both the geographic center of the country and as the hometown of the current president.

Putting all of these ideas from their conversations together, Melnick recalls, “I almost immediately thought, ‘United Sounds of America. This is America, this is our country, and this is what we’re about: bringing people together.’”

Jim Fahey immediately loved the idea, and they started planning how such a huge undertaking would work. “One of my goals when I first started getting into this with Jim was that I didn’t want to do obvious things and I didn’t want to do something that was uninteresting to the artists or the audience,” Melnick explained.

Together, he and Fahey selected the six iconic locations for their musical diversity. “The cities that we chose have such an unbelievable rich history of contemporary music . . . it’s pretty amazing to think about how many

★ *New Orleans* SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 7:00

Treme is the heartbeat of New Orleans. *A Night in Treme*, produced in conjunction with HBO, features the legendary **Rebirth Brass Band**; **Donald Harrison, Jr.**; and *Treme* star **Wendell Pierce**.



different styles of music have come out of these cities.”

They also chose seven music directors to anchor each concert—artists who not only embody the musical spirit of the city, but who are playing an active role in selecting the other artists and the repertoire.

Jazz great Bill Charlap and singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega head up the festival-opening New York City program on Friday, June 10. Their concert is split between a look at the classic American songbook—from Broadway to Duke Ellington—as interpreted by Charlap and special guests including Grammy-winning vocalist Kurt Elling. Suzanne Vega explores the singer-songwriter folk music scene in Greenwich Village from the 1950s and 1960s with special guests Tom Paxton and Richard Julian.

Folk legend Arlo Guthrie takes audiences on a trip down Route 66 on Saturday, June 11. America’s “Mother Road” celebrates its eighty-fifth anniversary in 2011, and Guthrie is creating a collaborative program



★ *Memphis* THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 8:00

Celebrated saxophonist and CEO of the Stax Museum of American Soul Music, **Kirk Whalum** leads an ensemble of Memphis legends in a program featuring blues, Southern soul, and gospel.

that showcases songs from the classic country western and Americana traditions featuring Vance Gilbert, Eliza Gilkyson, and Chris Smither.

The first weekend concludes as New Orleans native saxophonist Donald Harrison, Jr. leads *A Night in Treme* on Sunday, June 12. This show features an all-star lineup of New Orleans-based musicians narrated by Wendell Pierce, star of HBO’s *Treme*. The first half of the program explores the city’s musical history, and the second half is, as Melnick calls it, “a massive New Orleans party.”

The next weekend kicks off with jazz and gospel composer and saxophonist and Stax Museum president and CEO Kirk Whalum celebrating the musical diversity of Memphis



★ *Detroit* FRIDAY, JUNE 17, 8:00

Singer-songwriter and guitarist **Marshall Crenshaw** leads a Detroit super group featuring guest artists such as the great lady of soul **Bettye LaVette**, **Brendan Benson** of The Raconteurs, **Wayne Kramer** of MC5, and **Amp Fiddler**.

on Thursday, June 16. This concert features a multigenerational group of artists—led by Whalum and singers William Bell and Wendy Moten—looking at gospel, jazz, blues, and soul from Memphis, including the influence of such artists as B.B. King, Otis Redding, and Isaac Hayes.

Guitarist and songwriter Marshall Crenshaw tackles Detroit on Friday, June 17, with a diverse lineup including special guest jazz violinist Regina Carter, guitarist Mick Collins, and singer Bettye LaVette, which pays tribute to the Motor City's diversity. "The truth is that Detroit has an incredible history of so many types of music—rock, hip-hop, early punk rock, and garage rock," notes Melnick. "What Marshall Crenshaw is doing is to show the audience that, 'Yes, we have Motown, but we also have so much more.'"

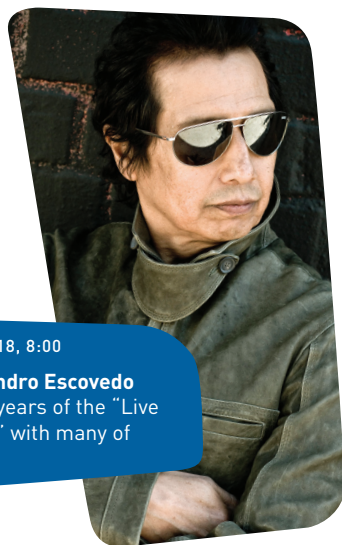
On Saturday, June 18, Texas-based singer-songwriter Alejandro Escovedo examines the history of music in Austin, from the Mexican conjunto music of the 1880s to the outlaw country and singer-songwriter tradition that dominates today.

Each music director is taking that role very seriously. "Marshall and Alejandro were totally excited," Melnick recalls. "I could see the wheels in their minds spinning as soon as we were talking about this. They both said immediately, 'I'm in—I want this.' After we talked, Marshall sent a huge outline of a concert that was totally stunning."

Melnick also thinks that the music directors will be inspired and

challenged by each other, even up to the very date of their performances. "The rehearsal schedules are night after night, [so] the artists might be able to attend the other concerts. So the Detroit guys might hear the Memphis concert the night before and be influenced by what Kirk did."

This spirit of collaboration and innovation makes United Sounds of America a can't-miss concert experience. Says Melnick, "I can't even grasp the totality of all this. I think the concerts are going to be amazing, and that the people who attend are going to be so happy they did." ■



★ *Austin* SATURDAY, JUNE 18, 8:00

Insightful and eclectic **Alejandro Escovedo** explores over one hundred years of the "Live Music Capital of the World" with many of Austin's finest musicians.

United Sounds of America runs from June 10–12 and 16–18 at Symphony Center. For tickets and more information, visit cso.org/usa or call (312) 294-3000.