Al Sears Music Fest Returns to Macomb, Celebrating a Hometown Legend and the Music He Helped Shape

Four days of jazz, bluegrass, R&B, Latin jazz and more will honor Macomb native "Big" Al Sears September 16-19.



Al Sears Music Fest 2026 Flyer

MACOMB, IL, UNITED STATES, September 9, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A Macomb musical tradition returns this fall as the Al Sears Music Fest brings four days of live music to the community September 16-19, celebrating the remarkable career and enduring legacy of one of the most accomplished musicians ever to call Macomb home.

For 15 years, from 2002 through 2016, Macomb honored hometown son "Big" Al Sears with the annual Al Sears Jazz Festival. The event became one of the Midwest's longest-running jazz festivals and helped introduce generations of music fans to Sears' remarkable story.

Now, the Al Sears Music Fest returns to Unforgettable Forgottonia with a diverse lineup that reflects the wide-ranging musical career of Sears himself, from jazz and big-band music to rhythm & blues, early rock & roll and beyond.

Sears was a tenor saxophonist, bandleader, songwriter and entrepreneur whose career stretched across some of the most transformative eras in American music. He performed with jazz legends including Duke Ellington, Chick Webb, Lionel Hampton and Johnny Hodges before becoming an influential figure in rhythm & blues and early rock & roll.

He later served as bandleader and musical director for legendary disc jockey Alan Freed's groundbreaking live Rock & Roll Revue, touring the country alongside some of the era's biggest names, including Bill Haley & His Comets, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, LaVern Baker, The Platters, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers and many others.

Former Rock and Roll Hall of Fame President Terry Stewart described Sears as a “renaissance musician and entrepreneur” whose career spanned the breakthrough years of jazz through the rise of rock & roll. Sears was also active in the Civil Rights Movement and broke the color line in upper management at major record companies.

The 2026 festival honors that legacy with a lineup that spans generations and genres.

FOUR DAYS OF MUSIC

The festival opens Wednesday, September 16, at Western Illinois University’s Goldfarb Center for Performing Arts with Chicken Wire Empire, performing from 7:30 to 9 p.m. The Wisconsin-based group blends bluegrass traditions with contemporary energy and musicianship. The Wednesday performance is a ticketed event.

On Thursday, September 17, the WIU Jazz Combo takes over The Wine Sellers from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., bringing the next generation of jazz musicians into the spotlight.

Friday, September 18, moves to the Western Illinois Museum for an evening built for both listening and dancing. Doors and bar service open at 5 p.m., followed by dance instruction from Rose Dance Co. from 5 to 5:30 p.m. The WIU Jazz Studio Orchestra performs from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., followed by another round of dance instruction from 6:30 to 7 p.m. The evening concludes with State of Mind, performing a mix of R&B, Motown, jazz and blues from 7 to 9 p.m.

Saturday, September 19, offers a full day of music at the Western Illinois Museum, beginning at noon with a Spotlight on Local Talent.

The Zoë Rose Trio performs from noon to 1:45 p.m., followed by a Western Illinois Traditional Music Association Jam Session from 2 to 3:45 p.m. After a break, Nico Berbaran takes the stage from 5 to 6:30 p.m., before the festival closes with the Craig Russo Latin Jazz Project from 7 to 9 p.m.

With performances ranging from student jazz ensembles and traditional music to R&B, bluegrass and Latin jazz, the festival reflects the same musical diversity that defined Sears’ extraordinary career.

MAKE A WEEKEND OF IT IN UNFORGETTABLE FORGOTTONIA

The Al Sears Music Fest also offers visitors an opportunity to explore Macomb and the surrounding region while celebrating one of the community’s most fascinating connections to American music history.

While downtown, visitors can take a spin around Macombopoly, a larger-than-life, 170,000-square-foot Monopoly experience celebrating Macomb native Elizabeth “Lizzie” Magie, the

inventor of The Landlord's Game, the precursor to Monopoly. The free, app-powered experience transforms Macomb's Historic Courthouse Square into a playable game board, with oversized game pieces, local history, trivia and challenges guiding visitors throughout downtown.

Free and open 24/7, Macombopoly is an easy addition to a festival weekend and another way to discover the stories and people that make Macomb unique.

From the legacy of "Big" Al Sears to the musicians performing on stage today, the Al Sears Music Fest celebrates Macomb's place in the story of American music while bringing the community together for a weekend of live performance, dancing and discovery.

The Al Sears Music Fest takes place September 16-19, 2026, at venues throughout Macomb. For the complete schedule, lineup and ticket information, visit alsearsmusicfest.com.

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About Macombopoly
Macombopoly is a larger-than-life, app-powered Monopoly experience played on the downtown square of Macomb, Illinois. Set on the historic Courthouse Square, the 170,000-square-foot experience pays tribute to Lizzie Magie, the Macomb-born inventor who created The Landlord's Game in 1903, the direct predecessor to the Monopoly board game. The game is powered by eATLAS and free to play. More at visitforgottonia.com.

About Visit Unforgettable Forgottonia
Visit Unforgettable Forgottonia is the destination marketing organization for McDonough County and the surrounding region of west-central Illinois, promoting the area's history, attractions, and experiences to visitors from across the state and beyond. More at visitforgottonia.com.

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