

Notes on the Blue Wing Blues Festival

Contributed by Thurman Watts
 Wednesday, 25 July 2007
 Last Updated Thursday, 26 July 2007

UPPER LAKE ‐ The inaugural Blue Wing Blues Festival has successfully joined the ranks of high brow Northern California music events.

Held from Wednesday, July 18, through Saturday, July 21, the event was the brainchild of maverick entrepreneur, Bernie Butcher, whose business savvy enabled him to draw some major talent to the small but mighty town of Upper Lake.

The event was sponsored by a hybrid coalition of business and private entities: KNTI Radio, The Tallman Hotel/Blue Wing Saloon, Remax Realty, and Dale and Jillian Billester.

Opening each night was Barry "Big B" Brenner, born and bred in that bastion of urban blues, Chicago's south side. Brenner is skilled in several sub genre's of the blues. These include Piedmont Rags, Texas Stomp, Atlanta Style and the good ol' Delta Slide. These styles were popularized from the 1920s forward by such iconic legends as Robert Johnson, Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red, Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly), Mississippi John Hurt, Blind Boy Fuller and this writer's favorite, Blind Willie McTell.

Brenner's Thursday night set went something like this. On "Highway 61" he utilized expert slide guitar fingerings on his National Steel guitar. For "Midnight Special," his axe of choice was the difficult 12 string guitar. When Big B played Jimmy Reed's "Bright Lights" he broke out his 1933 National Steel Trovedor much to the delight of the guitar aficionados in attendance.

Brenner performed "San Francisco Bay Blues" as an up-tempo number and made his 12 string sing like an African banjo in conjunction with a blue banshee. I ain't lyin'!

Other numbers performed by Brenner included "Dust My Broom" written by Elmore James and "Silver Streak" written by Brenner's son. He closed with an original composition, "Steppin' Up & Go," a rouser which set the stage for the Blues Diva of Lake County, Miss Bettie Mae Fikes.

Brenner currently resides in L.A. and hopefully won't be a stranger to these Konocti Shores. For more information on Barry Brenner, visit www.bigBBrenner.com.

Closing the opening evening's festivities was Bay Area Legend Freddie Hughes. Hughes is famous for his hit, recorded in the late 60s, entitled "Send My Baby Back." The single has sold approximately 950,000 thousand units worldwide and as a result Hughes is hugely famous in Europe.

Ditto Upper Lake on Wednesday night. Hughes had the crowd in the cross hairs of his blues gun as he and the Rich Kirch Blues Band cranked out a virtual history of rhythms and blues.

Culling tracks from his soon to be released CD, Absolutue Hughes, Freddie performed such hits as "Don't Let The Green Grass Fool You," "Last Two Dollars," "Love Land" and "Broke And Hungry."

His signature song, "Send My Baby Back," was the blues love ballad that brought the lovers in the house to the dance floor.

Rich Kirch is a fixture on the blues scene, most famously through his 13-year association with John Lee Hooker. Kirch has recorded and toured with many greats including Jimmy Dawkins, Jimmy Rodgers, Pinetop Perkins, Greg Allman, Jorma Koukonen, Billy Cox, Junior Wells and Hubert Sumlin.

The Rich Kirch Band consists of Rich Kirch, guitar; Michael Skinner, drums; and Ron Perry on bass.

The headliner on Thursday night was the great Bettie Mae Fikes. Though no longer residing in Lake County, Fikes continues to be our Blues Diva. Alas, now though, we must share her with the world. Blues patrons who frequented the now-defunct Konocti Blues Cafe know what I'm talking about.

A veteran of the Civil Rights movement, Fikes recently lent her chops to the recording of Mavis Staples' latest release, a reworking of those Civil Rights anthems and freedom songs that advanced the cause of the civil liberties that somehow are not paramount to the current administration of executive government. Hmm. Can the blues wax political? Anyway, Staples' new album, on which Bettie Mae contributes, is entitled “We'll Never Turn Back.

The band that backed Fikes included the talented guitarist Levi Lloyd, the great Andre Williams on drums, Ron Perry on bass and Carl Mureco on keyboards.

Tomorrow, Thurman Watts explores more of the great music brought to Upper Lake during the Blue Wing Blues Festival.

{mos_sb_discuss:5}