

Blue Wing Blues Festival featured local favorites

Contributed by Thurman Watts
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UPPER LAKE – The two sets performed by Bettie Mae Fikes on the night of Thursday, July 19, during the inaugural Blue Wing Blues Festival were preceded and augmented by the Levi Lloyd Band whose members were identified in part one of this article.

Although Rob Watson of James Brown's Soul Generals was advertised as the band leader, a last-minute gig for the Soul Generals in Italy required Rob to call on Levi Lloyd and his crew to provide instrumentation for Ms. Bettie. Ironically, Ron Perry, the bass player, gave Rob Watson his first gig and mentored him early on in his career.

Sound man D. Wills was a great crowd warmer with his dancing and singing antics on "It's Your Thing." Levi Lloyd's rendition of Jimmy Reed's "Big Boss Man" was dedicated to festival organizer Bernie Butcher.

From the opening chords of the great ballad "Soul Serenade," on through "Let The Good Times Roll," a medley combining T-Bone Walker's, "Stormy Monday" and B.B. King's "Nobody Loves Me But My Mama," was Bettie Mae improvising, testifying and singing the blues at its finest, despite struggling with allergies during her first set.

Remarkably, her voice was stronger during the second set and those in attendance marveled at the ease in which Fikes improved upon excellence. She truly had us like putty in her palm. She summed her expertise by commenting, "Though I love jazz, pop and country, the blues and gospel are what get me through this experience called life." Kudos to Lake County resident Mike Magbie for guesting on harmonica on "You Got Me Running."

Look out for Bettie's next CD, currently being recorded in Lake County. Summer Of Love Legend Mike Wilhelm and Lake Blues All-Stars featuring Jim Williams and Jon Hopkins were an early crowd favorite on Thursday night. Their set included Robert Johnson's "Love In Vain" and B.B. King's "Rock Me Baby."

Hopkins, the "Barrister of Bass," did a fine rendition of Jimmy Reed's "Big Boss Man," playing bass and harmonica simultaneously.

A female vocalist named Neon guested on "The Thrill is Gone" and "I'm Tore Down." When not singing she worked the crowd admirably and did great percussion work.

Jim Williams put the great Mike Wilhelm's career in perspective by mentioning that Wilhelm was Jerry Garcia's favorite guitar player. Wilhelm interjected that he was playing though an amp that he bought from Garcia. (On a side note, both Mike Wilhelm and Betty Mae Fikes were pictured in recent issues of Rolling Stone Magazine.)

Wilhelm displayed great virtuosity and chops in his note selection during his solos. The band closed with "Red House" and "Further On Up The Road" to a great ovation by the crowd. Great set! Though this writer has seen Twice As Good on two other occasions, the way they played Friday night was simply uncut, blistering, high energy blues power. It seemed like a different band. Celebrating the release of their new CD, Live At Pala Casino 2007, Rich and Paul Steward, Bruce Hodge and Chris Ho really gave it everything they had.

From the new CD, they started off with "T-Bone Shuffle." From his first duck walking guitar solo, Paul was on fire. They did Jimmy Reed. They did Albert King. From the 1920s they reprised Big Maceo Merriweather. Paul played keyboards, blew saxophone and harmonica, sometimes intermittently within the same song.

They did Elmore James. They did the self-penned "Rancheria" from their first CD. They did Santana, Solomon Burke, Bobby Bland, Ray Charles, Santo & Johnny, Big Joe Turner and a little "Mustang Sally" too.

Their aunt danced nonstop on stage. It was her 400th show with her nephews!

The crowd was enthralled and adoring. It had to be seen to be believed.

This writer has heard a rumor that Paul Steward sat in with the critically acclaimed Robert Randolph & The Family Band recently and outplayed Robert Randolph. Mind you, it's a rumor. But I believe it was the great Jimi Hendrix who sang, anything is possible, with the power of soul! Unfortunately, this writer was unable to attend Saturday's closing act at the festival, Blues Express recording artist, the great Frankie Lee. From all reports I've heard, Lee put on an incredible show, which included Claudette King daughter of King Of The Blues, B.B. King.

I guess Butcher will just have to have them back sooner rather than later. Blues, blues and more blues in Lake County. What a concept!

Thurman Watts writes about music for Lake County News.

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