

Bettie Mae Fikes wows Blue Wing Blues Festival

Contributed by T. Watts
 Sunday, 10 August 2008
 Last Updated Sunday, 10 August 2008

UPPER LAKE – The Blue Wing Blues Festival continued for the second night in the open air garden between the Tallman Hotel and the Blue Wing Saloon & Café on Thursday, Aug. 7.

Veteran world-class performers Kathi McDonald, Rich Kirch and David Hayes cooked up a raucous blues porridge of hits to open the show. The high-spirited crowd of people were treated to tight renditions of “Lawdie Miss Claudie,” “Talk To Me Baby,” “Help Me Baby (I Can’t Make It Alone)”, “Hound Dog,” “Hoochie Coochie Man” and “Rock Me Baby,” among others.

McDonald, very summery in a leopard-patterned, really short ensemble, pranced and danced about in high heels, interspersing her vocals with historical anecdotes about the blues music business. For example she cooed, “Albert King was one of the meanest men who ever slang a guitar.”

We can add another great artist to the census rolls in Lake County. Apparently, Rich Kirch has been living in Lakeport for some time now. We hereby welcome another great purveyor of the blues to the area.

In a post performance conversation with Bernie Butcher, 25-year Van Morrison bassist David Hayes was heard to inquire about the music scene in Lake County and Butcher invited him to check out Blues Monday’s at the Blue Wing and Hayes, who lives in Fort Bragg, seemed genuinely intent on stopping in from time to time.

After a short intermission, the BMF Band took the stage. Musically directed by the renown Robert Watson and fronted by guitarist Levi Lloyd, the group also includes drummer Steve Guerrero and keyboardist Richard Smith.

The group kicked off their set with a total Levi Lloyd arrangement of Junior Walker’s “Cleo’s Back.” They then did a tasty version of The Crusaders' “Put It Where You Want It.” The Crusaders are seldom covered. It was great stuff.

After running through a couple of Jimmy Reed numbers, including the customary, extended Bernie Butcher live remix version of “Big Boss Man,” it was diva time at the Blue Wing. Levi Lloyd declared , “good or bad, the blues is all about love. And here to break it down to you is …”

Bettie Mae Fikes paused just off mic and exchanged blues channeled energy with her muse. She launched into an absolutely accurate reading of “Your Husband Is Cheating On Us,” followed by “Down Home Blues.”

The dance floor overflowed like the libations of the Festival’s sponsors, Ceago Vinegardens and Zoom Wines.

Bettie Mae and the BMF Band were in fine form. Their blues and funk licks had folks continuously on the dance floor, a synchronized melding of the young and older.

When things had reached near fever pitch, the band took a break. When they returned to the stage, the groove continued. Bettie broke into a monologue that detailed her Southern roots. She spoke of her Gospel singing mother and blues gigolo father. How her friends gravitated toward rock and roll yet she stuck with the blues. She preached especially hard to the youth in attendance. I believe they received the message.

The set went an hour or so over the advertised end time of 9 p.m. If you missed Bettie Mae Fikes, she will be performing again in Lake County Oct. 4 for KPFZ’s Blues and Barbecue at the grange in Finley. In addition to her own CD, “Blues Holiday,” Ms. Bettie Mae also appears on the great Mavis Staples most recent CD, “We’ll Never Turn Back,” produced by Ry Cooder. Rolling Stone Magazine reviewed the CD complete with picture of Mavis and Bettie Mae in their May 3-17, 2007 issue. It’s a monumental testimony to the Civil Rights Era. Methinks you should get hip to it.

T. Watts writes about music and culture for Lake County News.

{mos_sb_discuss:5}