

CyberSoulMan: A report from the 24th annual Monterey Bay Blues Festival

Contributed by T. Watts
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MONTEREY – Picture 44 acts on three stages over a three day weekend – a potpourri of top-notch musicians from the world famous Neville Brothers of New Orleans to lesser known local newcomers like the Dani Paige Band – against a backdrop of Monterey Bay, with delicious international flavored cuisine at every turn.

This year's Monterey Bay Blues Festival was blessed with sunny, balmy temperatures in the daytime from the mid 70s to the low 80s despite the forecast for gray 60s.

We arrived on Saturday in time to witness the set of Winnsboro, La. native Ernie Johnson, a favorite on the blues festival circuit.

We then caught the Saturday night closer of soul great Clarence Carter, who crossed over with his 1970 hit, “Patches.”

Carter, who is blind, is also known for his risqu  repertoire. Adult themed songs like, “I Be Strokin’” and “Dr. C.C.” keep him popular with the mature baby-boomer R&B crowd. Standing absolutely still at the microphone, save for the movement of his hands on his guitar, Carter’s mellifluous baritone monologues kept the audience in stitches.

On Sunday, the first performance on the arena stage was for those inclined to appreciate gospel music. The feature was the heavenly sounds of the revered Mighty Clouds of Joy. Led by the great Joe Ligon, the Clouds went back to the country church of Ligon’ childhood and ushered forth songs he remembered being sung by his grandfather.

“My dad was a Gospel singer, his dad was a preacher,” said Ligon. “My grandfather didn’t have a strong voice, but I loved to hear him sing, 'Nearer My God To Thee.'”

Building as well upon the many years of great gospel recordings by the Clouds, Ligon built the spiritual tension into a wonderful explosion of joy, praising the name of Jesus in conjunction with the faithful in the crowd who stood exuberantly and joyfully.

The Clouds set list included “You Need The Lord,” “Praise His Name,” “Ride The Mighty High” and several others, including the Ojays' “Love Train” which started their set.

We had an exclusive audience with the great Teeny Tucker, who happens to be the daughter of the legendary Tommy Tucker. He was the composer of the blues standard, “High Heel Sneakers.” Tucker was one of many Chess Records artists who were left out of the critically acclaimed film, Cadillac Records.

Since 1963 when Tommy Tucker (born Robert Higginbotham) crashed the charts with the original version of the song, it has been recorded over 200 times, by the likes of Elvis Presley, The Rolling Stones, Sammy Davis, Jr., Jose Feliciano and many others.

Teeny Tucker started her career in her church choir in her hometown of Columbus, Ohio, at a very young age. Two of her best childhood memories was receiving a transistor radio for Christmas and discovering Mahalia Jackson on it.

She has spoken of visiting her dad in New York and begging him to let her stay up late to hear him jam with other musicians, then falling asleep under his Hammond B-3.

She branched into top 40 as a young woman and was persuaded into singing the blues by a European promoter familiar with her dad’s canon. The promoter thought she sang blues like her dad and offered to book her in Berlin if she would learn some blues. She learned 10 songs and was booked by the promoter and it launched her blues career. Teeny was well into her 30s at that point in her career.

We actually started Sunday evening interview off by swapping notes on a performance the prior evening of a lovely performer whose thin voice wasn’t able to withstand the rigors of a slamming, hard driving band.

I then remarked somehow to Teeny Tucker that the great Eastbay/World vocalist Lady Bianca had sang “Precious Lord” at my own mother’s funeral back in May. In a blues/gospel moment of synchronicity, Teeny admitted she had sung the same song at her own mother’s funeral back in February of this year. We then consoled each other with post funeral anecdotes relating to family dynamics.

I related to those in attendance, which included Teeny Tucker's bandleader, Robert Hughes, and my photographer, Gwen Windham, that Teeny would have been a natural to play the part of Etta James in the recent Cadillac Records film. Teeny then recalled a recent festival experience where she reprised the Etta James song, “At Last” and brought down the house.

CyberSoulChildren, I wish I could but play you all the audio tape of the interview. We covered a myriad of subjects in the 20 or so minutes the tape was rolling. She talked about her love of West Coast blues diva Sugar Pie DeSanto.

Teeny reminisced about sharing the stage in 2007 with the recently departed Chicago blues queen, Koko Taylor. She recalled what a kind, sweet woman Koko was and what a knock-kneed, nervous experience it was to sing a duet with the Queen. She will always remember the music tips that Koko gave her that day.

She recalled how early in her career under the compelling call of the stage, she drove from Columbus to New York in the dead of winter to audition at the Apollo Theatre. The payoff was the standing ovation she received.

As we ended our interview with Teeny Tucker she indicated that her forthcoming CD is nearing completion and should be released around Thanksgiving. She gave a joyous shout out to her fans old and new.

The Lake County News Crew then retired to the audience to witness her steaming set which included material from the forthcoming CD as well as a song written by her dad entitled "Daughter To The Blues";

Monterey Bay Blues Festival Director Lee Durley composed a tune for Teeny Tucker that she opened her set with. She also did a bone chilling, gospel-inflected version of Bob Dylan's "Serve Somebody";

The finale was "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," the rouser popularized by Jerry Lee Lewis. Teeny, in a little history lesson, taught the crowd that the original version of the song was recorded by Big Maybelle who received \$500 and an obscure footnote in the history of the blues for her efforts.

Teeny Tucker has enlarged Big Maybelle's window of history with her current release, "Two Big M's - A Tribute to Big Mama Thornton & Big Maybelle." It's a great album by a great artist celebrating the contributions to the world by two great foremothers of the Blues.

Information on the Monterey Bay Blues Festival can be obtained at www.montereyblues.com . Visit Lake County News next week for a CyberSoulMan report on the July 4 weekend Mississippi Valley Blues Festival in Davenport, Iowa.

Keep prayin', keep thinking those kind thoughts!

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