

12TH SANTA CRUZ BLUES FESTIVAL

APTOS

MAY 30, 2004

There comes a moment during the performance of any good musician when, given the right energy and atmosphere, the musician advances beyond the technical chops and paint-by-numbers of rehearsal to some other level which cannot be explained, barely described, and beyond the ability of anyone to teach, but which is truly an exaltation of sound. The performer seems to enter the music in a mystical way. This weekend saw the 12th Annual Santa Cruz Blues Festival held in Aptos Village Park, a normally lightly attended fund raiser for the local library. Spectators this time around witnessed this exaltation no less than eight times there in the burning glade.



John Cleary and the Absolute Monster Gentlemen started things off in the unenviable starting position on Saturday, but after a cool beginning, the New Orleans resident, formerly of England, made that piano stride ride into the

disappearing clouds overhead. With Matt Carter on drums, Big B on lead guitar and Cornell Williams on Bass and backing vocals, Cleary just kept cranking up the excitement with nice covers of Body and Soul, Damn Fool's Game, Cha Cha all Night Long and the Crescent City classic, Tipitina.

Cleary performs in the style of Professor Longhair and Dr. John, and we could even hear a kind of Dr. John pronunciation in the way he sings the lyrics.



Angela Strehli, proved that some good things do come out of Texas. Besides Lyle Lovett and beef. With Ron Thompson of the Resistors and Mike Schermer supplying mouth harp and guitar she and Tracy Nelson balanced the day with blues centered on female vocals. They closed with a nice version of Blue Highway.



Son of Luther Allison, who played with Freddie King, Howlin' Wolf, Sun Ra, and Willie Dixon, Bernard Allison has had some awfully large footprints to

follow, but has made a name for himself by branching away from the Chicago blues of his dad, even to the extent of moving from the Windy City to Milwaukee.

Allison proved to be the day's Big Surprise with a flashy display of guitar techniques and savage string attacks that lost nothing of melody similar to what Jimmy Hendrix would have done had he lived longer. Allison finished up with a blazing version of "Frosty" with a cakewalk through the crowd (aided by the new wireless amp technology), prompting many to declare this -- somewhat prematurely -- as Best of the Fest.

Ron Sutter on drums and Jason Wilberly on Bass. Steve Wahawkis on keyboards.

Here he is giving people the experience of their lives while giving Security a workout.



Daughter of Johnny Clyde Copeland, is another of the New Generation, who is not slacking at all during her careening tilt at a Grammy nomination, four W.C. Handy awards and five Living Blues awards, armed with a multi-octave voice of amazing power. On this day she played the role of the sassy, brassy, Lady of the Blues to the hilt and the crowd ate it up. Here is Shemekia, being very good while singing about being very bad. Arthur Nielsen assisted on guitar.



Most teenagers only dream of becoming a Star. Johnny Lang, in 1997 released *Lie to Me* at age 17 and went straight to the #1 Billboard chart and stayed there for a solid year. Born in North Dakota, he began performing with a saxophone at age ten, and went on the road with a band at age 14 -- with his parent's permission.



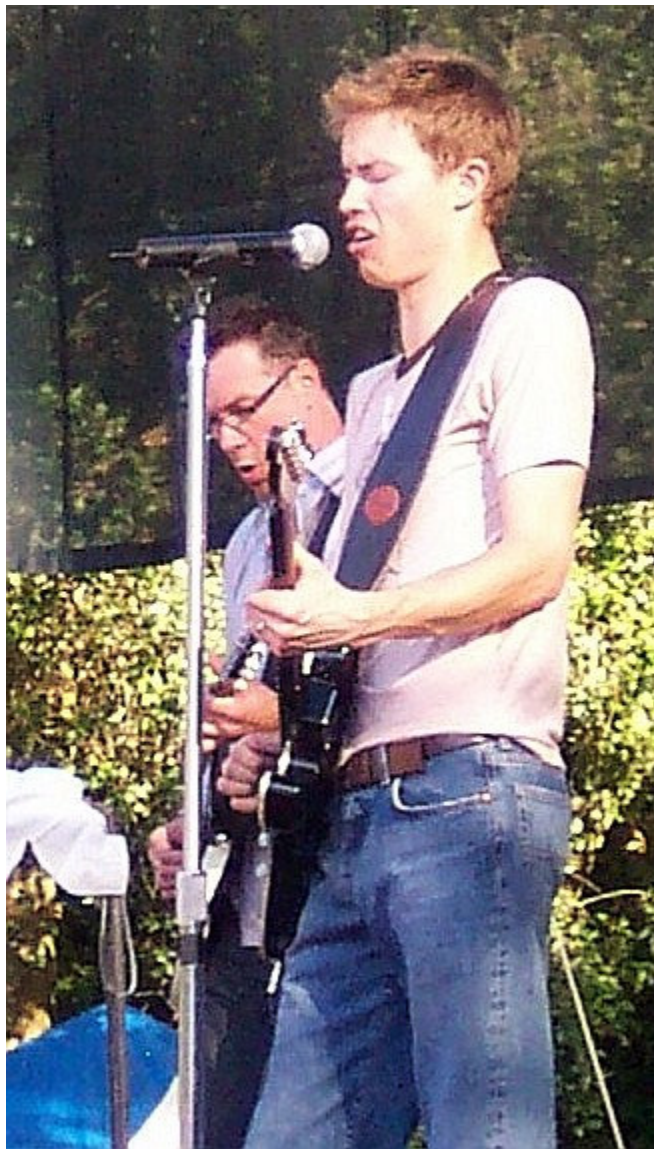
Unlike so many others on stage, Lang forgoes the porkpie hat and fancy suits for the attire you see here. The man behind me thought he was just a roadie testing the mike at first.



Lang began his set with a pair of screeching and energetic hard rock numbers which somewhat put off the purists but which we enjoyed as a welcome release from the same old thing syndrome. Later he segued into selections from the popular CD releases, notably "Wander this World", "Lie to Me" and "Still Raining." With a voice that sounds at first -- a bit deceptively -- like an old chain-smoker who gargles every morning with whiskey and razor blades -- Lang was

able to stretch his range considerably more than one would expect. The crowd loved him and he won over the vocal critics and hissers mid-way through -- which is not an easy thing to do -- to the point that everyone shouted for an encore, which he graciously provided.

Lang uses F-hole Fender flattop semi-hollow body guitars in a variety of open tunings.



After Lang's set, we took the free shuttle bus to the parking lots at Cabrillo College, well toasted after spending eight hours under the sun.

Something must have happened overnight, for where there had been sad scalpers trying to unload tix outside the gates on Saturday, on Sunday knots of people stood begging for extra tickets to the sold out show. Word had gotten out, that this year the Festival was a ringer.

On Sunday, the Holmes brothers, from Christchurch, VA opened up with some stomping roots blues. We missed that one, unfortunately, as the aloe was still drying on the previous day's burn and the remaining clouds evaporated as the weatherman hourly revised the forecast upwards.

Tommy Castro took the next slot on a day that would prove to be a juggernaut of accelerating energy.



Tommy Castro, whose band has been titled "Hardest Working Band in SF" for some eight years running by local weekly magazine SF curmudgeon in its annual Best Of series. It's said that "when Tommy Castro tears into a set and comes up for breath a few songs later, his familiar crowd connector, "Is

everybody having a good time?" seems unnecessary. A San Francisco native, he has been out of town for some two years as he and his band perform with BB King. He is always a total enjoyment to watch with his sassy, playful take on things and a marvelous sense of humor that is well in keeping with the blues tradition.



Michael Burks is one of those classic figures, somehow larger than life while still in his lifetime, who is destined to have stories told about him, for the stories have begun already. The story goes that his father promised the boy a

dollar for every song he learned. Using the family supply of old 45's, Michael quickly learned hundreds of songs and nearly broke the bank. Realizing that his son was a prodigy, his father had a 300 seat juke joint built in Arkansas to showcase his son's talent.

This sort of enterprise is not a small enterprise for a man who made his money working steel in Milwaukee. Burks got picked up by Johnny Taylor and has since struck out on his own, hitting virtually every major blues festival across the country, and earning accolades with the deep resonance of his voice and blasting guitar licks similar to the old Eric Clapton.

With a new CD under his belt, titled *I Smell Smoke*, and aided by Wayne Shays on Hammond Organ and John Bailey on Bass, Burks amped the energy in the glade another notch with his custom made flying-V Gibson.

Michael Burks is unique among guitarists who can play well and fast in that he has a superlative command over dynamics and can make the instrument whisper and melt as well as scream.

Possibly in memory of his father's contribution, Michael Burks said at one point, "I'm gonna take you all right now to a juke joint. You all know what that is? We gonna be juking!"



With Coco Montoya, a seven year veteran of the Festival, the action ramped up a notch, if that could be at all possible. Nobody believed it could happen but Montoya, aided by Bennie Lee on keyboards melted the cinders of what Micheal Burke had left.

A student of Albert Collins, who acted as tutor and father-figure to the rising Montoya. Their relationship continued to the last hours of Collin's life, and Montoya performed for five years in the Iceman's band. During a hiatus in LA, John Mayer handpicked Montoya for his new Bluesbreakers project, with whom he performed for the next ten years. Serving as adjunct to such luminaries put off Coco's solo recording debut until 1995, when his *Got a Mind to Travel* garnered him the prestigious WC Handy award.

In an interview with *Guitar World*, Montoya mentioned that, as Albert Collins lay on his deathbed they had a conversation about the hard times Collins had seen, including the pain of racism's viciousness. Montoya reports that Collins had no bitterness at all and said as his last words on earth, "There's no room for hatred in me, my boy; I have only love in my heart."

In a wailing, searing, howling, uplifting 14 minute extended version of "I Have Only Love", Montoya gave tribute to Collins and there was not a god damned dry eye in the house. This was blues as it is meant to be: soulful, transcending, emotional and as powerful as an express locomotive pulling away. It was the kind of thing you want to hold up to all the cynics who claim that the living blues is old hat and out the way; it was the kind of performance you sit through a thousand dunta-duntas in boring 12-bar same-o style to experience for

it went way beyond the forms to that other place of high art, and transforms everything you will ever hear ever afterwards by the memory of what music can do. This was the thing for which I had been dragging the Significant Other, who is the Primal Punker Incarnate, to hear. This was IT.

And when the last echoes of Coco's guitar had died away in the sudden roar of thousands of people calling out, screaming, clapping, stamping, jumping up and down, and all kinds of things, after an incredible performance that would have capped any show done by any major artist in the business, bar none, Coco says, almost apologetically, "I gotta do this thing which I do at the end of every performance. If there is still time."

He then gets Tommy Castro on stage and begins a little "head-cuttin" competition right there and the whole place got livelier than a Revival tent.





They played so hard, so furiously, so energetically, that Tommy had to change out his guitar after busting a string. Then Coco busted a string and had

to swap out his guitar as well and keyboardist Yee filled in the gaps so well, both Coco and Tommy stood back to let the man go at it for a spell.

Then they finally get Michael Burk to join them on stage and the entire crowd rushed past Security right up to the edge of the five-foot high stage.



Finally, all the excitement pulled one of the Holmes Brothers on stage with a tambourine.



We got pressed up against the stage next to the lighting stanchion about six feet from the lead mike; watching these old friends go at it, hammer and tongs, performing pure improvisation and cussing good natured (off mike) at one another was absolutely delightful. It was one of those rare times when the performers are all jamming together, having a ball and getting into that unique space where the watcher can see the musicians being transported to some other place.

It was a Second Finale of a scope that could, again, have closed the doors. We all could just as well have gone home at that point, feeling satisfied.

Except the headliner was next.

Buddy Guy, a veteran of fifty years of performing on stage, winner of four Grammys for four consecutive albums, uncounted Handy awards, colleague and

co-player with Muddy Waters, Freddie King, Otis Rush, Junior Wells and many others, only achieved superstar status despite having played with the entire pantheon of superstars, in 1991, when he began his Grammy roll on the Silvertone label.

He appeared on stage, backed by the famous Double Trouble, the same band that backed Stevie Ray Vaughn.

Now, Guy's approach to live performance is wildly divergent from his studio work and anyone who expects the man to play the same stuff -- or even act the same way -- as his studio work will be disappointed. In fact, we were convinced the man was hopped, stoned and wasted until told by people who knew him that Buddy Guy ALWAYS acts this way.

In his hour-long set he played only two songs to completion, did a number of parodies of Eric Clapton, Ray Charles and some others ("I just want you to know, I can do that too", he said), ambled and toyed with an acoustic guitar, using it as a drum and rubbing the strings with various parts of his body, including, apparently, his zipper, started Double Trouble on a crunching edition of "Cold Shot" before walking off the stage without singing a note of the song, and generally behaved like Courtney Love on a bad day.

On the flip side, he one-upped Bernard Allison's cakewalk with an erratic stride of his own through the crowd while playing an extended version of Muddy Waters' "Everybody Knows I am Here" that tore the house down, and played most of "Damn Right I got the Blues" in a way that really made the song come

alive. His rendition of John Lee Hooker's "Boom Boom" also put his own unique and fresh imprimatur on the old classic.

In short, the Guy performance was a quixotic mixture of sheer genius and genial buffoonery that was either divinely inspired or self-indulgent. Certainly at 67 the fellow has all his synapses firing well enough; everything he did appeared to be deliberately done and well-scripted at that. At one point, during a scathing guitar solo -- yes, he did do some music -- he hit a sustained note and held out his hand while the sound continued from the amps. A roadie came out with a cup and handed it to him as he stood there motionless. Moving only the cup hand he appeared to drink from it, slowly, then handed back the cup. This was repeated while the sustain continued. It certainly was entertaining, but as for memorable experiences? Well, thank god for Coco Montoya.

As mentioned, Double Trouble began "Cold Shot", then Guy walked off stage and did not return for an encore despite many very loud entreaties.

No photography was permitted during this portion of the concerts by request of the artists, which included Double Trouble. All other pictures that appear here were taken by yours truly and are printed here, all rights reserved. As always, images here are meant as endorsements of the artists described and presented. Some people attempted to take pictures despite the express wishes of the artists, but that ain't our style, man, so we respect the wishes of the people we came to see and hear.