

14TH ANNUAL SANTA CRUZ BLUES FESTIVAL

APTOS

MAY 28, 2006

Drove down to Aptos for the first day of the 14th Annual Santa Cruz Blues Festival. Almost stayed for Day 2, for leaving meant we passed up hearing and seeing up close and personal The Boneshakers, Dave Alvin, North Mississippi Allstars, John Hiatt, and Los Lobos at what is becoming a premier event in Northern California characterized by stomping energetic performances by Five-Star acts in an intimate venue.

Day one featured Mike Schermer, Rod Piazza, Coco Montoya, Roomful of Blues, and His Highness, BB King, who celebrated his 80th birthday this week.

Well, as much as we would have liked to see John Hiatt, its rather harsh to have to follow up somebody like BB King. We were basically toast after that one, so John will have to wait a bit.

Let's get back to the chronology. The Festival, sold out this year, has become such a "must see" item among the Blues aficionados, up there with the massive Monterey Festival with its four seperate stages and 54 acts, that all of Santa Cruz County hunkers down for the onslaught, with \$120 per night hotels doubling and tripling their normal rates and the \$350 palaces going well above the roofline. So we picked a cabin in little Ben Lomond in the wooded hills well up Rt. 9. Even so, we only got that at double rate because the reservee had to leave suddenly for Canada.

Between noisy hotels bracketed by surf-side slock and kitsch, hey, give me a mountain cabin any day. Wiser and more soulful heads failed to prevail in the rebuild of Santa Cruz and Capitola after the disaster of the '89 Loma Prieta earthquake, which levelled both towns. Now, Santa Cruz is just another tourist trap with sand and expensive sand dollars, with only the occasional corner busker lighting up the barren commercial district with a flash of life.

Events like the Blues Festival may help to turn things around, for although the face of SC may have changed, the Lifers have remained and you can still notice a grizzled beard and weather-lines strolling through the crowds or driving beat pickup trucks that actually are used to do real work. And above the beach area, low-level garden-houses still squat together in sandy soil strewn with succulents and dessicated palms and bicycles. Nope, the Residents have not gone away.

YOU DON'T CHOOSE THE BLUES, THE BLUES CHOOSE YOU

Now back to our regular program. We managed to miss Mike Schermer and most of Rod Piazza due to what the Navy formally terms a SNAFU. Our Editor and Guiding Light left the Gold Circle Tickets back at the cabin. On top of his guitar case. Perhaps appropriate, but largely ineffective in the case of a sold out show. After retrieving the entry visas, we parked the Official Press Vehical in the Press Lot in Aptos -- most attendees must park in the lot at San Cabrillo College and take the free shuttle bus down the road -- and sauntered in with an occasional frisk and bag check or two. Rod Piazza was winding up a scorching

set by leaping off of the stage to stroll through the crowd during an extended solo. Not for the last time did folks beg for "just one more."



Suppose that if Jimmy Reed handed you a harmonica in person, one would persist. And persist the man has, over forty years.

Food court supplied "southern fried" usuals. Recommend the BBQ chicken and avoid the "pulled pork".

Long time favorite Coco Montoya took over the stage with customary humility. Given that none other than Albert Collins taught the man guitar, his humility tends to be a bit of understatement regarding his abilities. But then, as a

founding member of the Bluesbreakers, which jumpstarted Mick Taylor, Peter Green and a young buck named Eric Clapton, perhaps he has played with so many superstars he is comparing himself to the best and the brightest. Even there, we think no false modesty is required here. He has a CD coming out soon, engineered by Peter Barrere (Little Feat) so his set was particularly sharp. His previous studio recordings have been flat and despite W.C.Handy Awards, failed to catch on for all of their musical proficiency. But live, Montoya turns into quite a monster, providing raw, pure, blistering blues the way it should be played by everybody. Never painting by numbers, and never lapsing into boring duntaduntas, Montoya continually reinvents himself on stage when performing and the result is quite exciting. His ode to father-figure Collins, on CD sounds vaguely Motown and lacking oomph. In performance, this same 2:30 song of acknowledgment turns into a 13 minute opus of swelling pain and extraordinary emotion that last time destroyed the House. It was everything the Blues is supposed to be, and the best of anything anyone in music ever hopes to attain.



Montoya's humility has one major benefit to concert-goers, for he dearly loves the old-fashioned "cutting heads" session and is not ashamed to invite all comers on board to show what they got. "I need some help here now!" He said. "Rod Piazza just done blown me off the stage! I need some help here!"

Up pops local hotshot Tommy Castro, an incendiary guitarist in his own right and leader of the repeatedly elected Hardest Working Band in the Bay Area. He also happens to be a personal friend of Montoya. He and Coco started right off matching riffs and playing off of one another. This Montoya, felt was not

enough, so he called for yet more help. He needed to drag Mighty Mike Schermer back from his starting set to fill out the sound.



But no that was not enough for Coco.

Rod Piazza's guitarist, a rather accomplished Henry Carvajal, stepped up and started ripping into the sound. Then Rod Piazza stepped up to add his blistering harmonica.

The Security could barely hold back the crowd from rushing the stage with all this talent and finally Coco was satisfied.

As was the crowd, it might be said.



After a brief intermission, the famous Roomful of Blues hopped on stage and took over with their unique brass-heavy jump-blues style. ROB began as the Chicago-style brainchild of Duke Robillard but soon pumped up with swing and '40s jazz and started touring with Count Basie. Horn mutes and gutsy sax punch out the ROB sound, together with a real Broadway showmanship as the lead singer swigs a hip flask before launching into a gut-bucket blues "2 for the price of 10" story of a gambler's woe. The strength here is on firm ensemble work where nobody is the star for long during well-crafted musical orchestrations that allow all members to shine. The lead guitarist, for example, seldom faced the

audience during some crunching numbers, preferring to guide the others through the paces. They provided quite a nice "Dark Night is Falling" .



But every seat was filled there to celebrate the birthday of one man who ended that memorable day in Aptos.

During the setup, we noticed that the usual roadie entourage was missing this time. Third Ear handled the set changes but the next band handled its own instruments and setup, with one notable exception. As amateur photogs crowded the pit, Nat Bolan, chief bandleader and conductor of the BB King band personally oversaw the setup of every mike and every detail shortly before he was to perform. The drummer set up his own kit piece by piece and the keyboardist took charge over his own area. These are professionals who have been doing what they do for a very long time and there is no need for somebody to get in the way with any sort of "help".



The sole exception was the placement and care of a single black guitar cared for by an earnest young man whose entire responsibility lay in placing that guitar in its place and making very sure it was tuned and very very very clean.



All performers wore classical black and white tuxedos with polished shoes. No one, except for soundmen wore blue jeans.

All right there is no need to go into theatrics where theatrics were all ready included. After some time, the band took the stage and launched into an extended jam. At the end of which, various members looked anxiously offstage.

Then, the announcer said simply, "Ladies and gentlemen. Please rise for BB King."

All five thousand people rose as one and a great cheer went up. It was the cheer of ancient centuries, of acknowledgment of royalty, of true appreciation, of love and devotion, of all that and more. Who has not felt something in their time of life that BB King did not inform with his music?



From the moment Mr. King sat down he held the entire crowd in his hand, and Lord, did he work that crowd! "Yes I am now 80 years old. Some people say I am old and can't stand up and play my guitar any more. Well, they are right. I have diabetes and my knees are bad so I have to sit here."

After that admission, and brief concession to his age, Mr. King proceeded to rip up the house with vocals, to start, and charm with risqué stories, and then to savage any notion of his present ability to play by tearing up the place with well orchestrated versions of "Just Like a Woman", "Key to the Highway," and "Thrill is Gone." His rendition of "Love Comes to Town" was so energetic, it felt like the first time he had ever played the popular song written by U2's Bono for him. And his constant effort was the experienced Showman's effort to include the audience."



Yes, he told stories, campy and erotic and sometimes long-winded, but he is a man from another Age and that is partly why we love him still.

"Well you know Bono wrote this song for me. For me! When love comes to town that is me! Now I want you to sing!" There is nothing like hearing five

thousand people screaming, not just singing, but screaming, " Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeeeeaaaaha!"



As his two hour set went on, his powerful baritone, still impressive in power at 80, yielded to warmed-up fingers as he and Lucille took over the music, fluidly riffing and trilling in the unique single-string BB King style.

His version of "Keys to the Highway" brought tears to the eyes, for as he seriously intoned, "I won't be back here no more," he and the people knew that was a very true statement for the man is eighty after many long years of trying to get him to come to the Festival there. And he cannot be everywhere at once in the time he has left. No, it is not likely he will return to that little glade in Aptos.

And so we gave him, our only King, all of our love on the event of his 80th birthday, and he gave us all his best, for that is what he has always done for well

on sixty years, three hundred days per year. Of a King, one could ask no more and expect no less. Of an adoring audience you could expect no more and no less. That was BB King at the 14th Santa Cruz Blues Festival.

When his handlers draped his coat over his form, we were sad to see him go. We want to keep him forever. He is our King of the Blues.