

Blues Brunch At The Mart

Jazz Record Mart
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THE SOUND of gritty, electric blues fills the night air in Chicago. However, you don't have to be a night owl to experience great blues in the Windy City. On the final morning of the Chicago Blues Festival, an annual Blues Brunch is held at the internationally known Jazz Record Mart (JRM). On the menu is more than coffee and donuts. The main entree is a free concert featuring an all-star lineup of Delmark Records' blues artists.

There has been live music at the store since the '90s. When the JRM moved into their new location in 2004, the staff put some of the record bins on rollers and moved them out into the hallways, opening up space near the blues section of the store for the event's performance space.

The featured artists at this year's event all have new Delmark releases available. According to JRM owner and Delmark founder Bob Koester, "[For the brunch], we try to focus on the artists who need the most exposure." This was the third year in a row that Pierre Lacocque acted as the musical director and his group, Mississippi Heat, acted as the house band and took the stage at 10:00 a.m.

For this gig, the core band consisted of harpist Lacocque, vocalist Inetta Visor, bassist Stephen Howard, and drummer Kenny "Beedy Eyes" Smith. Sitting in on guitar was special guest John Primer. Lacocque played both diatonic and chromatic harp on the expressive opening instrumentals. Then Primer ripped into "Going Back To Mississippi" from his latest CD *All Original*. The painful good-love-gone-bad lyrics of "Dirty Deal" were blown away by Lacocque's carefree harp. "She Ain't Your Toy" contained foolproof ideas (lavish her with complements, treat her as an equal, don't disregard her, and make her feel wanted) regarding how to treat a lady. Immediately, the crowd became engrossed with these songs. When the focus wasn't on Visor's natural larynx-busting vocals or the band's captivating grooves, it was on Lacocque's veteran harp, which sounded like a cross between Sugar Blue and the Sonny Boys.

Prior to the brunch, Lacocque said, "I came to Chicago from Belgium in 1969 at the age of 17. That is when I first heard the amplified blues harmonica with Big Walter Horton. He performed 'La Cucaracha,' and I couldn't believe it. It was a revelation and a life changing moment. I was in a state of awe. The next day, I went to buy a Hohner harmonica and spent hours and hours every single day trying to replicate that same sound. From my earliest recollection, I had a very deeply ingrained sense of sadness and loneliness. I was not able to express myself in words. I almost stuttered at times. It was very rough. That particularly conflict really helped me a lot with what I do musically, because I found a way to express that."

There is a certain depth to Lacocque's music that is absent from other contemporary acts. No doubt the insightfulness was aided by Lacocque's unique upbringing and scholastic achievements in Existentialism, Psychology, and Theology. Many of his songs mix the hopeful with the terrible. His sweet melodies contrast with tragic lyrics, and his intense harp shares the anguish of the lyrics. This harmonica wizard's greatest joy comes from composing and performing music.

He founded Mississippi Heat in 1991. After having Chicago blues guitar masters such as Carl Weathersby, Lurrie Bell, James Wheeler, George Baze, and Billy Flynn record with the band, Lacocque recently recruited Primer into the Mississippi Heat family. "I've known John for

quite a long time. He has traveled with us to Europe, and did some concerts with us recently. My wish for this album [*Live It Up*] was to bring more of a Chicago blues feel. I wanted to go back to Chicago. It is my home. It is where my heart is, and it is where my love is. I felt John would definitely add a lot to what I was trying to accomplish."

Dave Weld followed Mississippi Heat. Weld has been a regular guitarist on the Chicago blues scene since he began playing with Hound Dog Taylor's band in the '70s. He is a protégé of Chicago slide guitarist J.B. Hutto. The highlight of Weld's set was "Ramblin'" from his new Delmark CD *Burnin' Love*. Dealing with Weld's love/hate relationship



JOHN PRIMER AND PIERRE LACOCQUE

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with Chicago, he sings ("You can love Chicago/Chicago won't love you"), and states, "[Chicago is like] a dog so hungry he chews his own tail, [just] the way Chicago feeds off its own residents." The song also deals with the fact that it's hard to make it in your hometown. "J.B. Hutto always said he never made it until he left Chicago, and told me that it might be the same for me."

Other blues brunch performers included Rockin' Johnny, who has recently re-emerged after disappearing from the blues scene for several years, and Willie Buck who performed a series of standards like "Nineteen Years Old" from his new Delmark release *The Life I Love*. Eddie C. Campbell also performed with his talented daughter Sheba, who sat in and sang "Summertime" with him. Finally, Tail Dragger brought the Blues Brunch to a conclusion.

Many other artists were present in the store, mingling with fans and browsing through CDs and vinyl. For over two hours, brunchers experienced authentic, gut-bucket Chicago blues in its natural habitat. The music was stirring, but the camaraderie that transpired among the fans and artists at this intimate event was most memorable. The JRM Blues Brunch proved why it is always one of the highlights of the Chicago Blues Festival weekend.

—Tim Holek