

30th Annual Blues Festival

Fort Mason, SF

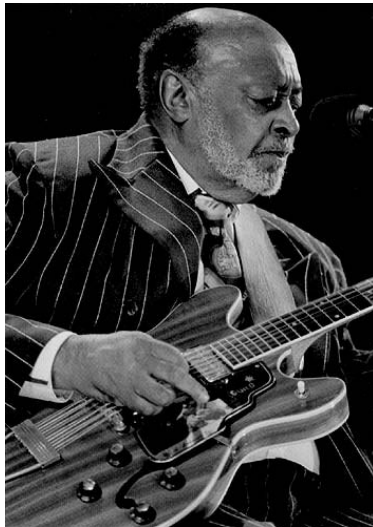
SEPTEMBER 29, 2002



Under gorgeous skies and moderate, sunny weather, Babylon hosted the 30th Annual Blues Festival out at Fort Mason. Me and the Significant Other took a cruise out there to catch some of the illuminaries of the Blues on Sunday,

arriving in time to hear Robert Lockwood Jr., sole remaining survivor of the Old School perform songs written and recorded by his stepfather and guitar teacher, Robert Johnson.

Yes, *that* Robert Johnson.



Born in Turkey Scratch, Arkansas in 1915, Lockwood began performing with his stepfather at juke joints and parties until Johnson's murder in 1937 by a jealous woman. From then on he pursued an increasingly illustrious career that continues to feature extensive public performances at the age of 89 and for which some of the best musicians in the world vie for stage participation. Winner of the first 1980 and 2001 WC Handy award for Best Traditional Blues Album, 1995 awarded the National Heritage Fellowship Award by Hillary Clinton, Honorary Doctorate of Music by Cleveland State University are among of the few of his many accolades.



Another blues legend taking the stage after this admittedly hard act to follow, was James Cotton, who has turned the humble mouth harp into an extraordinary instrument and is credited with rescuing the career of Muddy Waters with his scorching solo at the 1960 Newport News Jazz festival.

Band-mate of Muddy Waters for 12 years, he has performed with virtually every major blues performer, past and present, since his birth on a plantation in Tunica, Miss. 1935. He got his first fifteen cent harp for Christmas and worked fetching water for the field hands. During his breaks, he would play his harmonica in the shadow of the foreman's horse. Both of his parents died when he was just nine years old, and so Sonny Boy Williamson raised him from there as part of his traveling band, abandoning the entire band under Cotton at one point to go live with his estranged wife.

Without experience, the fourteen-year old could not hold the band together. Once again cast adrift, James found a man by the name of Howling Wolf, scammed his way into the nightclub and impressed the man so much he

was taken on for another four good years, recording several singles and even managing a daily fifteen-minute radio spot at the age of 17.

Staying out of trouble and keeping off drugs paid off well for the bluesman, who went on to play with Muddy Waters, Janice Joplin, Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin, Carlos Santana, Steve Miller, Freddie King, B. B. King and many others, always putting on a very energetic, high-voltage show.. After operations for throat-cancer in 1994, he was forced to remove vocals from his set and slow down a tad, no longer performing full back-flips in mid song. Sunday, everyone on stage clearly was in awe of the man, and his vibrant take on the blues still punched through with remarkable power.



Continuing the trend of super-powerhouses, Otis Rush took the stage.
Here is an excerpt from the official bio:

"One of the greatest guitarists in the history of the blues! Dozens of albums. Architect of the famed Westside Chicago guitar sound. Hypnotic guitar and hypnotic vocal vibrato. Truly a legend in every sense! Probably the greatest blues guitarist to come out of Chicago. Gut-wrenching vocals. Ranks with B.B. King, Buddy Guy."

Not too shabby. Otis picked up the guitar at age 8 and began performing in church choirs in his birthplace of Philadelphia, Mississippi. He moved to Chicago in 1949 in search of work and, after watching Muddy Waters perform, decided to become a professional musician. Rush is best known for being the first to include the electric bass as part of the standard lineup, which fueled a far more aggressive sound than the old upright had allowed.

The last two hours of Sunday afternoon and early evening were dedicated to the much-anticipated 1960s Chicago reunion of Steve Miller, Charlie Musselwhite, Elvin Bishop, Barry Goldberg, Harvey Mandel and Nick Gravenites, along with vocalist Marcy Levy. The set took on a super-session feel at the start - a super jam not unlike the glory days of the Fillmore Auditorium - where all had performed in the late 1960s. All had met in Chicago in the mid-1960s and had drifted west to San Francisco in the wake of the Butterfield Blues Band. Steve Miller kicked things off.



It may be odd to say that a man with over 22 albums to his credit, who sells one-million copies each year, and who has a star pressed into the Hollywood Walk of Fame came on wearing a dowdy green sportscoat and thick eyeglasses, acting with all humility as if he were just a kid stepping up on stage among adults, but Steve Miller did exactly that and still won the hearts of the crowd with a very capable closing set that roped in all preceding members plus an additional handful of lights, including local luminary Elvin Bishop.



Yes, he did do a version of "Fly Like an Eagle", which he handed during the jam to the astonishing guitar work of Harvey Mandel, but for the most part "the Joker" was content to sit back and let the stars shine. Cotton returned for a nice instrumental call-and-response thing between his harp and Steve's guitar.



Quite a nice surprise were the vocals provided by the very soulful Marcy Levy, who offered some tasty estrogen to balance the definitely testosterone-fueled final day. Levy has performed as integral band-member of Bob Segar, Leon Russell and Eric Clapton, with whom she co-wrote "Lay Down Sally". Unlike a lot of the blues "shouters" out there, Levy possesses a strong command and control over three octaves with some very sophisticated modulation. Her "Just Cry" had the crowd right in the palm of her hand.



Among others, any one of which is worth the price of admission in their own right, were Charlie Musselwhite, Nick Gravenites, Harvey Mandel and pianist Bob Goldberg.

By the end of the extended jam, even the eucalyptus trees were bopping and swaying to the driving beats. In short, it was a good day for the blues.



Charlie Musselwhite



Nick Gravenites



Harvey Mandel



Bob Goldberg.

All photos here from the event presskit or the Sfblues.com website.