

**ROBERT CRAY
FOX THEATRE
JANUARY 23, 2005**



In first hand reports, we have stunning accounts of the recent harmonica Battle of the Blues that took place recently at Yoshi's Nightspot. The annual event, hosted by Mark Hummel, featured Charlie Musselwhite and James Cotton. Rumor has it that the New Boy on the block blew both out of the water. Got no more to say on that.

SANCTUARY

Drove down to the Fox theater to catch a basically unknown show with bad publicity on behest of the Significant Other. Knew only that it was billed as a Robert Cray concert.

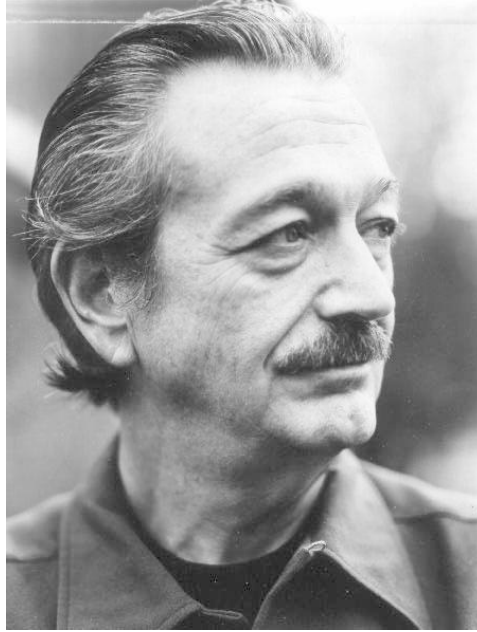
Got there and discovered that Coco Montoya and Charlie Musselwhite were also on the bill and this was third in a series organized by some genius at the Montalvo Winery.

Hell, the first two were draw enough for us. Coco Montoya, a relative unknown due to poor studio engineering and artistic direction decisions, has never failed to electrify audiences everywhere when performing live. His performances have typically been classic examples of "this is how you do it" and Saturday night he hardly failed to provide as audience members demanded in vain for a return to the stage after his opening set. Montoya was adopted as a "wayward child" by Albert Collins, for whom he played the drums, and was encouraged by the master bluesman when Coco set out on his own. The left-handed Coco learned how to play the guitar from Collins and quickly established himself as a master musician.



His studio recordings have been fairly indifferent in quality -- plenty of musical integrity but lacking the fire that comes out when Montoya plays live. Whenever Montoya steps on stage with his signature "upside-down" strat, the atmosphere seems to yank an incredible spirit out of the man, for he then turns the simplest of songs into a slashing, wailing, searing attack upon the emotions. Largely because of those studio recordings, he has remained unknown except to a few in the know who will understandably travel hundreds of miles to hear him play. The crowd begged him to stay and play some more after his brief 45 minute set, but it would have been presumptuous in the extreme to hold off the following two headliners.

Memphis-born Charlie Musselwhite is an old hand at the blues, one of the few survivors left from the golden days of the gods in Chicago where he would go to listen to Sonny Boy Williamson when not performing himself. We first heard him in 1982 in the famous Rathskeller in Berlin, the dinky old club where the Beatles got their start, and man was he hot. In the mid-ninties we saw him rescue the show for John Lee Hooker at the Fillmore, where Charlie tore the place up, impressing even the young punks who had come to laugh at the increasingly feeble Hooker, who was to die only a few months later well into his 90's. Saturday night, Charlie proved he still has the stuff, coming out unannounced and unnoticed to place that old metal briefcase of mouth harps on to a little side stand and wander about chatting with the roadies.



On his website, Charlie has this to say, "My father gave me my first guitar when I was 13 in 1957. I already loved blues and decided to teach myself guitar. I'll never forget how good it felt when I played an E chord and then put my little finger in position to play an E7 chord and how good that felt. Blues not only sounded good, it felt good! I went on to get to know a lot of old time blues players around Memphis and picked up quite a bit from them."

"In Memphis there was Will Shade, Furry Lewis, Willie Borum, Earl Bell, Abe McNeil, Red Robey and more; later in Chicago there was Big Joe Williams, Homesick James, John Lee Granderson and just too many to name in this space - I just about knew them all. I remember when I was a teenager, Will Shade telling me he was going to teach me the same way he was taught. When he was a teenager Will met an old man that taught him and now he was going to pass it on to me - guitar and harmonica. "

His most recent album, *Sanctuary*, winner of the WC Handy award for Best Blues Album of 2004, is unusual in that, like Charlie's other studio recordings, it managed to capture some of the liveliness and zip in his live performances. At the Fox theater, his set caused a rousing standing ovation, which brought him back for an excellent encore featuring the title cut from his album and a Sonny Boy Williamson song, "Need Your Help."

With his substantial background in other forms of music, such as various South American folk styles, Charlie brings quite a range to the blues form, managing to avoid the tedious shuffles and dunta-duntas that make the staple of so many lesser bluesmen. It helps to have guys like Charlie Sexton backing him up on guitar as well, for Sexton plays a crisp, sharp slide that compliments Musselwhite's long glissandos and wavers. No question, the night could have ended right there and we would have been perfectly happy.

After a longish set change, the headliner, Robert Cray took the stage. Unlike other blues artists, Cray never seems to have suffered for his music, entirely demolishing the stereotype of the poor boy who learns how to play on an old crate strung with bailing wire on the plantation. born in 1953, he is part of the New Generation of blues artists. Nominated for 11 Grammys and holder of five, success met the man quickly and has never left. His band has stayed together since 1974 with few changes in personnel, for the musicians know a good thing when they got it. His heavily soul-inflected style has been panned by purist critics who long for a bit of "crunch" in his ultra-smooth sound, but his immense popularity gives him little reason to change.



The Fox theatre audience, consisting of a fair number of greybeards, loved him to death, shouting out encouragement and rapping with the startled performer, who eventually worked into the juke joint atmosphere created by the two preceding bands. Cray has had several songs break into the top 40, and has worked closely with Eric Clapton, Tina Turner, Buddy Guy, and other crossover artists. There is no doubt that the silky smooth tenor has immense talent -- which may be the undoing of his style. For the man does everything with so little apparent effort that the emotional content of songs like "Strong Persuader" and other hits, bleeds away in a feeling of excellent technique and high production values. Musically, the man is without equal. All of his songs are well-crafted, tight, and smoothly performed with few surprises. The crowd at the Fox managed to get him to break up the presentation a bit, which provided welcome relief. Nevertheless, what Cray does best is less of gutbucket blues than Motown Soul

and Southern R&B Soul with a bit of Carribean flavor. If that is your cup of tea, then there probably is no one out there better than Cray and his band.

Personally, we prefer the lesser talent standing on the stage, sweating, yanking irregular sharps and flats from a battered six-string, voice cracking on the edge, but pushing that little bit he or she has to the very limit, breaking strings in mid-song and howling at the mad moon for all the misery of the world or shouting a joyful noise at the wonderful splash of good whiskey in a chipped glass. That is what we live for. That, my friends, is the Blues.