

CHICAGO BLUES FESTIVAL

GRANT PARK, CHICAGO, IL

JUNE 2007

SWEET HOME CHICAGO



It was only a matter of time before we paid tribute to the City that launched a thousand hips. Took in part of the annual Chicago Blues Festival down in Grant Park this past weekend.

Beginning in May, the Mayor hosts a series of free open air events in the parks that border Lake Michigan, including the Blues Festival, which draws the

old timers from all over the place back to the Source. This year, the main event heralded the 92nd birthday celebration of Howling Wolf, with family members and former bandmates all congregating for a shoutfest at the Petrillo Bandshell.

After a dubious period of weather shenanigans, the skies opened up to sunny, pleasant weather, albeit more humid than Californians are used to.

Island-Life staffers got pinned down by Severe Weather in Wisconsin as that state suffered seven tornados, upping its century-held record of one by as many times a twister touched down to make people miserable, which had us rolling into town late Saturday for the Festival.

We did manage to catch Cephas and Wiggins out at the Front Porch Stage, Little Howlin' Wolf, and the festival closeout jam with James Cotton with Hubert Sumlin at the Bandshell, followed by the raunchy roadshow of Bobby Rush, to whom Blues means nothing other than Sex, Sex and more Sex. That guy did more hip gyrations than Elvis Presley on Eveready batteries and his backup dancers could have supplied an entire city with electricity on their booty-shaking energy alone.



Cephas and Wiggins are probably the only surviving artists who still perform the Piedmont Blues style, a form that developed in the Appalachian mountains in response to local limitations. Each performer in the PB style must be prepared to supply the melodic line, comping, and basic rhythm for one never knew if all band members would be available to play. In addition, the mountain districts featured few piano instruments, or players who could use them, so the guitarists developed a style that attempted to duplicate the popular two-handed sound of the roaring-twenties barrelhouse. The result is a complicated thumb-roll combination with finger-picked melody lines that distinguishes itself from the

spare Delta arrangements most people are accustomed to hearing. The Carter family picked up on this style most notably and employed it heavily in their country arrangements.

Little Howlin' Wolf stepped on stage in 1947 and has not stopped performing since that time. He, alone, has earned the fairly honorable sobriquet referencing the grand master by marrying into the family and carrying on the tradition. He is a reminder that the Blues is more than just an artform genre, but a warm, human, family and friend oriented community that is all about experience and real life. You can't just make a big noise and make musical pyrotechnics to get into the Blues. You don't choose the Blues, the Blues choose you. Anyone else calling themselves "Little Howlin' Wolf" had better check their credentials at the door.

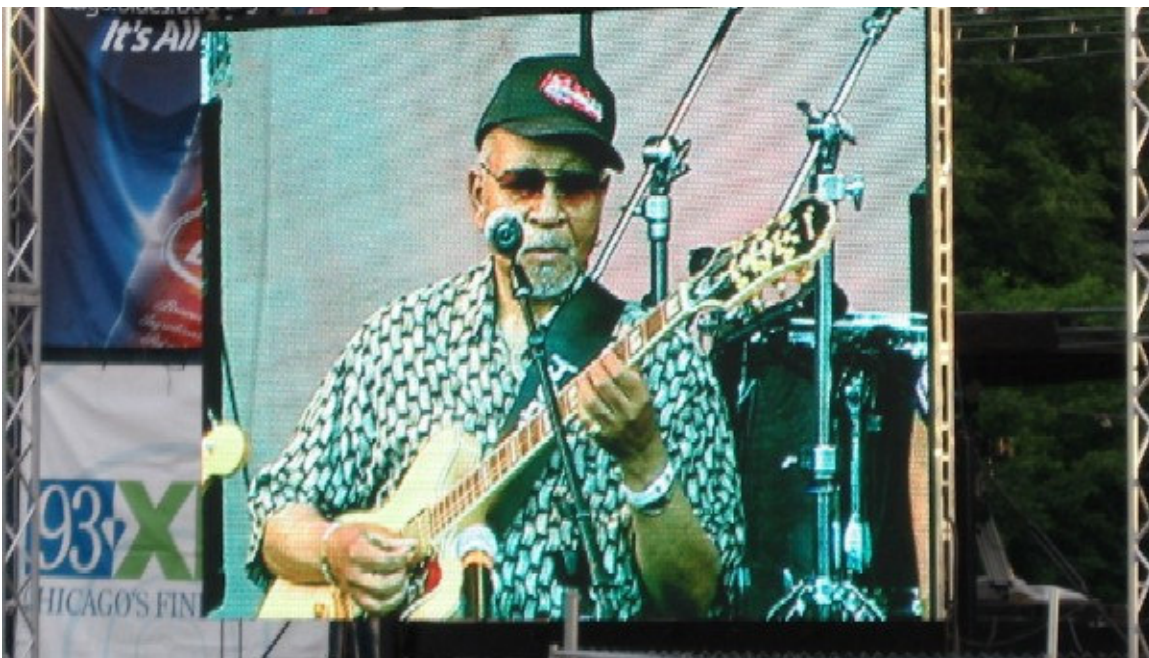


Jessie Sanders (Little Howlin Wolf) was born and raised in Florence, MS, along Highway 49. He lived in Chicago most of his life, during which time he spent many hours in blues clubs and on the road with the late great Howlin' Wolf. Jessie first took to the stage with Howlin' Wolf in 1950. Wolf took Jessie under his wing and it wasn't uncommon for him to be heard referring to Jessie as his "son".

Out of respect and admiration for his long time friend and mentor Jessie began performing as "Lil Howlin Wolf".

He performed on weekends with Blues greats such as Howlin Wolf, Jimmy Reed, Hound Dog Taylor, Albert King, Magic Sam, Freddie King, and Little Junior Parker. They did shows at Silvio's Lounge on Chicago's west side. During a visit home in 1947 while at WDIA in Memphis he met BB King and Bobby Blue Bland while they were there doing a radio spot. A decade later he would share the bill with not only BB King and Bobby Blue Bland but also the likes of Little Milton, Chuck Berry, Bobby Taylor, and Jimmy Reed. He's also shared the stage with (sat in with) legendary greats, James Brown, Aretha Franklin, and Millie Jackson.

The Festival ended after dark at the Petrillo Bandshell in Grant Park. A limited number of seats were available, but the vast majority of folks gathered on the grass to listen to the music and watch on the big projection screen set up at the fence.



In the true style of the City, the ensemble gathered for an old time Chicago blues jam featuring James Cotton and Hubert Sumlin on stage with Eddie Shaw, Jody Williams (vocals) and Willie Smith doing amped up versions of Howling Wolf tunes with members of the "Wolf's" family attending at stage left bleacher seats.



James Cotton just seems to increase in size everytime we see him. The man looks immense from any sort of distance, but that may be a function of reputation. Hubert Sumlin, lead guitarist for the original Howling Wolf, just keeps on playing as if he has made some pact with Another Power never to age.

Together the two tore it up for 90 minutes, getting a sizeable throng dancing in the side aisles.



Bobby Rush closed out the evening with a rollicking risqué show evoking James Brown with a healthy dollop of high energy raunch and roll. When those backup dancers started shaking their booties, one after another, Bobby acted like a little kid, delightfully non-PC, as he spoke to the crowd. "Guys! Will you look at that! I know your wife doesn't want you to look, but . . . look at that!"



In the spirit of the Festival, the Blue Cross building that sits on the edge of the park lit up selected floors for the show.

