



Lobos, Watermelon Slim lead musical charge

Balanced mix of styles, user-friendly venue are treats for blues fans

Peter North

Freelance

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EDMONTON'S LABATT BLUES FESTIVAL

Where: Heritage Amphitheatre, Hawrelak Park

When: Today, box office opens 3:30 p.m., show 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday box office opens at noon, show 2:30 to 10 p.m. Show goes rain or shine.

Tickets: Weekend passes are sold out. Friday passes (\$35) still available through Ticketmaster, Megatunes and at the Chateau Louis Hotel. Limited number of Saturday and Sunday passes (\$45) available at the door.

Parking: Limited on site. Take park-and-ride from U of A stadium parkade, 116th Street and 89th Avenue.

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EDMONTON - A couple of performances at the Vancouver Island Music Festival in early July acted as a reminder that our own summer festival season would end with a bang -- at the Edmonton Labatt Blues Festival.

Los Lobos, as the unit usually does, had an audience of more than 7,000 music fans gyrating in a picturesque park in Comox, B.C., during 90 minutes of tunes that criss-crossed from Tex-Mex border music to the rock 'n' roll of Neil Young to a blend of blues and rootsy pop music.

Forty-eight hours later on the same site, the right hand of Oakie phenom Watermelon Slim, armed with a rectangular slide, was skating across the fretboard of his lap steel.

Both Lobos and Slim are two reasons why both days 2 and 3 of Edmonton's Labatt Blues Festival are virtually sold out -- as far as pre-ordering through ticket outlets is concerned. Festival organizers do hold back a handful of tickets for the gate for Saturday and Sunday -- but arrive early if you want them. And there should be plenty of tickets left for tonight's triple bill of the Du-Rite Aces, Mitch Kashmar and Elvin Bishop.

As the festival enters its ninth year, both fans and individuals who work in the industry feel the Labatt Blues Festival presents one of the more complete, dyed-in-the-wool programs of any festival on the continent.

"There's a really nice mix of acoustic and electric blues ... both modern and traditional," says Fred Litwin, president of the Northern Blues label and the man who signed Watermelon Slim to his label. His company also represents acts like Paul Reddick, The Twisters and Janiva Magness, who have played past editions of the Labatt Blues Festival.

"For instance, I love Fiona Boyes, who plays Saturday afternoon," Litwin says from his Toronto office. "Fiona is a great guitar player, and how can you miss with an artist like Elvin Bishop?" The successful bluesman was a headline act at the festival in its inaugural year.

Singled out in a recent article on festivals in the New York Times for both its artistic vision and the user-friendly site at Hawrelak Park, the Edmonton festival has presented such blues greats as Delbert McClinton, Ruth Brown, John Hammond, Dr. John, James Cotton and Ike Turner over the years.

"But one of our mandates is to introduce fans to acts that haven't been up here before," says festival co-producer Cam Hayden, who says Boyes, Nick Moss and John Long fall into that category in the 2007 lineup.

Moss, who plays the Heritage Amphitheatre on Saturday night, is an electric player who has been touted as "the future of Chicago blues," while Long is an acoustic bluesman signed to the Delta Groove label out of Los Angeles.

For his part, Litwin figures the current state of the blues "is very strong.

"The Blues Music Awards in Memphis get bigger every year and the International Blues Challenge in January, which is also held in Memphis, gets over 150 acts from all over the world. So more and more people are playing the blues.

"Unfortunately, the state of the record business is another story, as it is getting harder and harder to get discs into stores."

Litwin will likely move a load of Watermelon Slim CDs this weekend at the blues store in the Heritage Amphitheatre.

Strong disc sales or not, one thing is certain: The Labatt Blues Festival has established itself as a major player on the Western Canadian festival scene.

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