

Quest for the blues...



Georgette Fry
ANDRE THIERIAULT & PETER J. CULLEN
THE BRUNSWICKAN

FREDERICTON HAD a severe case of the blues last week and we set out to find it. Luckily for us the annual Harvest Jazz & Blues was easily arranged for our convenience, with an interesting mix of North American artists performing primarily at the Boyce Farmer's Market. We wandered through the streets with one question on our minds: What are the blues? Of anybody, the artists appearing at the Harvest Jazz & Blues festival should know. Georgette Fry, Carlos del Junco, "Studebaker" John Grimaldi and Pinetop Perkins became temporary tutors in our quest to fully comprehend "the blues."

Thursday night's spectacular Maple Leaf Blues Night yielded Canadian talents such as Cat Bones, Georgette Fry, and the world-renowned Carlos del Junco. Cat Bones, the jazz and blues cover band out of Bathurst, opened with standard tunes like "Kansas City (Hey, Hey, Hey)," sounding more like Paul McCartney than McCartney himself. Providing great vocals and a splendid technical performance the band performed with feeling, despite the fact that their entire set list consisted of covers. It was a good start off point in our quest, as their show helped point us towards the work of the old masters.

But at that point, fate would point us elsewhere. Feeling hunger for more than the blues we ventured downtown where we heard the very identifiable sounds of B. B. King's "The Thrill is Gone." When we first came across the

sound's source, a band playing underneath a weathered blue tarp in front of a local fruit store, our initial thought was, "Man, they've really let the Blues Tent go this year." However, we were mistaken. The band, Blues Vibe, had staked out their own location and cranked their amps for the entertainment of passers by. They played everything from B. B. King to Bob Marley -- and that's all we heard. Blues Vibe finished their set soon after we arrived, and the crowd dissipated into the night and the local pizza parlours. Still unsatisfied and left wanting more, we ventured back to the Farmer's Market to witness the evening's first headline, Georgette Fry.

Fry was the first to elaborate on what the blues are, and where the inspiration resides within her. "It comes in many ways. Some days you wake up and it's in your head. Sometimes I start with a specific project in mind. But sometimes it just triggers." While Fry develops a lot of her material in a writing workshop back home, she utilizes more than her own songs onstage. Naturally she dipped into the esteemed Robert Johnson catalogue, singing "Come On In My Kitchen," probably the most blues-influenced tune on her album, *Rites of Passage*. "The Robert Johnson (song) is a tribute to the guy who changed it all." As well, she employs Tom Waits' "On the Nickel" in her set, a lullaby she used to sing to her first born. ("As deranged as that may sound," she laughed.)

During her session onstage at the Farmer's Market, her style evoked elements of several artists, most predominantly Bonnie Raitt. Touches of Joe Cocker and Van Morrison distinctly shone through, yet she dwelled heavily in the country domain for a good part of the show. Fry did bring it back to the blues but she seemed laid-back while performing, either due to comfort or hesitation on her part. Her band definitely held back, as the sax player even required sheet music, something not expected of a seasoned blues band. Overall, Fry and her musicians presented a good show to their crowd, but because of their self-imposed restraints they were

completely overshadowed by the amazing Carlos del Junco.

"I like to say I'm guilty of being different," del Junco stated after his performance. And what a performance it was. From the moment he first hit the stage, del Junco electrified the crowd with his unique style of harmonica playing. He uses the "overblow" technique, a style in which the artist forms his mouth around more than one specific note, producing a chord-like sound. It is a style that served del Junco well, as his performance contained energy and passion, while his sound was simply phenomenal. del Junco started the evening with a serene look on his face, but that quickly changed to a look of intensity and concentration as he seemingly stepped into a world of his own. Wailing on mostly cover material, del Junco and his band mesmerized the gathering with an extraordinary display of talent. His neck became a billows as he coaxed wondrous notes and harmonies from his harp, stunning his audience. del Junco may have made it seem effortless to the crowd but the strain showed on his face, as the bulging veins in his forehead stood as a testament to the power he conjured up.

"It's in your face and drivin'," del Junco said, in way of explanation of his performance style. Surely, this man could provide some insight into the blues, especially its trademark tool, the harmonica. When many people think of the blues, the first instrument they think of is the harp itself. "It has vocal quality," del Junco explained of the harp's popularity. "It's similar to a baby's cry... (and) it's the next thing from a human voice people relate to."

When we asked him about the blues itself, del Junco replied that the feeling behind the music is, in essence, rooted in everyone. "It's really in all of us. It's a throwaway line, but it's true."

del Junco believes he finds his own interpretation of the blues, especially through his own methodical style. "The overblow technique I use makes it melodically more interesting. Some say I play too many notes, but I like to be progressive... Every decade is a newer and newer direction," del Junco certainly carries on that tradition in his own right.

Saturday night at the Farmer's Market centred around two people: "Studebaker" John Grimaldi and

Pinetop Perkins. In our continuing quest for the blues we spoke with Studebaker John, one slick cat straight out of Chicago who certainly knows his blues. Studebaker started into music with harmonica and percussion on his mind, but wasn't quite sure what his future foretold. "For a time I gave it up but there was always something that led me back to music." The defining moment for Grimaldi's music career occurred the night he first saw Hound Dog Taylor. "It changed my life. It kind of hit me all at once. I mean, what's the sense in not doing it when this is what you want to do? It ain't about



Pinetop Perkins

the money," he explained, "it's about the love of the music. Otherwise, you don't stick to the music, 'cause the money ain't that great."

"Shy away from covers," Studebaker insists. "I just don't feel that anyone could put their heart and soul into something somebody else wrote 20 to 30 years ago. What's the point? It's on record, it's been done, it's there. Man, there's not a whole lot you're gonna do that's gonna better it. If you've got a story to tell, you'd better start saying it."

When asked about the blues, Studebaker immediately looks to his musical ancestors. "Unless you go back and catch the roots of what blues is, you can't have the right idea about what makes it good. Blues is a style a lot of people like, and I think it's a style a lot of people in this country will warm up to in the next few years. There's a lot of folks out there that have no place to go, and the blues speak to them."

While Studebaker stresses his Chicago connection, he acknowledges the true birthplace of the blues: the Mississippi Delta. "The Delta blues is the more acoustic stuff. It's really where Chicago blues started from. Guys



"Studebaker" John Grimaldi

like Muddy Waters put a hard, pounding beat to it, added a few instruments and electrified the others and that's all it is. They put time to the blues. Chicago blues is basically Delta blues with structure." Pinetop Perkins, one of the few remaining Delta blues masters, wryly put the two styles in perspective. "Well, I'll tell you about the Chicago blues. All the guys who started it came down from the Delta: Muddy Waters and Howling Wolf came from the Delta bottoms. Down in those parts, they didn't have recording studios, so they came from down south with the blues, came to Chicago and made them," he stated emphatically.

Pinetop has been playing the blues for decades. A great accolade for him was holding the position of pianist in Muddy Waters' band for eleven years, starting in 1969. "Muddy took me all over the universe," he recalled. Pinetop also played with other blues greats, like Sonny Boy Williamson and B. B. King. "I've been playing music since I was 10 years old, and I'm 83 now. The blues has changed a little bit. The boys learned to play that rap and stuff, and it's just loud. When I was with Muddy Waters we had the stuff down and everything felt good. That's the difference between then and now."

But on Saturday night Pinetop joined Studebaker John and the Hawks for what was perhaps the most exciting show of the festival. At the outset, Ron Regnas, a swingin' '70s polyester-clad bass player marked stage left. Mike Garrett adorned the right of the stage, playing guitar admirably. But in the centre stood the soul cat, Studebaker John, adorned in majestic purple and topped with a matching beret. After a

couple of tunes Pinetop wanted to show the crowd how it was really done. Joining the band, Pinetop began pounding away at his piano, launching into a set that shook the Farmer's Market to its very foundation as the other musicians tried to keep up with him. Offstage, Pinetop seemed frail and somewhat tired; onstage, he played like a man possessed. 40 years eased off his frame as his face lit up and he played for the sheer enjoyment of it. Unfortunately, the crowd was unable to witness Pinetop in all his glory. While Studebaker John held centre stage, Pinetop sat over to his right, outside the central focus. Even from there, however, it was still clear that he commands the show.

As the final evening of entertainment ended, so ended our quest. We came away from the week with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the blues. What are the blues, really? Our tutors, for the most part, seem to believe it's within the individual: "That's a cliched line, but a universal truth," Carlos del Junco stated. But perhaps Pinetop Perkins said it all as he attempted to sum up what the blues meant to him and to all of us. "I'll tell you about the blues. Some people have the blues and don't know it. Something worries you to death, and you got the blues, even if you can't sing it. Down in Mississippi, my native home, the blues is everywhere. I just make up a whole lot of stuff, you



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