

★ Steppin' OUT ★

15TH ANNUAL BLUES HEAVEN FESTIVAL Frederikshavn, Denmark, 12th-13th November 2021

Arriving at the small seaside town of Frederikshavn almost at the northern tip of Denmark, it's hard to believe that you have reached the home of the Blues Heaven Blues Festival (until a few years ago known simply as Frederikshavn Blues Festival).

During its fifteen years of existence the event has become one of the major annual blues festivals in Europe. This year's festival stood out as the major European blues festival of 2021, simply because there wasn't anything else of similar stature taking place because of Covid restrictions. Festival president Peter Astrup had the courage to take the risk of putting up a line-up and bringing to town a top-notch array of the highest calibre blues talent for his festival.

Held at a huge sports arena, the Arena Nord had two stages, the with main stage was reserved for the biggest acts, with the programme structured and scheduled in a manner that the audience could move between stages without missing any of the artists or performances.

The festival kicked off at the main stage with Monster Mike Welch, whom I had seen previously at this very same stage three years ago with Mike Ledbetter, whose dramatic, untimely death at age 33 shocked the blues community in early 2019. Welch's show was understandably quite different, but his high-energy guitar playing and spirited singing got the festival off to a fine start.

Kirk Fletcher is one of the best axe men in business, today. Although not that much into singing during his early career, Kirk has clearly focused more on his vocals lately, he obviously realised it is a necessity if wanting to front a blues band under his own name. We heard several songs from



Kirk Fletcher © Pertti Nurmi.

his latest CD 'My Blues Pathway', one of the best blues albums in 2020.

John Primer with his Real Deal Blues Band is a true keeper of the Chicago blues tradition. Intensive, vibrant vocals combined with distinctive guitar playing polished to perfection during over half a decade in business. He doesn't use any pedals while playing. Quoting the man himself with a smile on his face: "I play the guitar with my hands, not with my feet". Furthermore, he likes to call his versatile hands as 'spider fingers'. John's slide guitar playing was developed under the tutelage of Muddy Waters.

An essential component in the Real Deal Band is the harmonica of Steve Bell, (son of the great Carey Bell). Steve got a lot of solo space next to Primer and can be considered a member in the league of top blues harmonica players today. It was delightful to hear Steve's frequent use of the whining mouth harp sounds introduced by his father decades ago.

Sixty-six years young Lil' Ed & The Blues Imperials has been the face of slide guitar blues for longer than most can remember. Unfortunately, his last album was released five years ago. Always a man with a big smile. One strength of The Blues Imperials is that guitarist Mike Garret and drummer Kelly Lyttleton have played behind Lil' Ed for over thirty years. The entire show was a big success with many of his trademark songs, guitar licks and stage (and face) gimmicks. If this Lil' Ed won't get you in a good mood, then nobody will.

Some of the other acts during the Friday evening at the Café Stage included Chicagoan Rockin' Johnny Burgin replacing harmonica player R.J. Mischo, who had taken ill just before leaving for Denmark. Rockin' Johnny was accompanied by a Finnish trio led by guitar player Tomi Leino who also plays harmonica. I missed the performance of feminist artist Gaye Adegbalola because of doing some interviews at the same time.



John Primer © Pertti Nurmi.

Saturday evening started at 5pm with the Swedish-Danish collaborative band Kokomo Kings. Then it was time for the first female act of the night, Nora Jean Wallace. She went formerly under the name of Nora Jean Bruso and recorded her first and only 45 as simply Nora Jean for Jimmy Dawkins' Leric label way back in 1982.

Despite her many decades behind the scenes, she is still a great songstress with a powerful voice belting the blues yet extending easily to higher register when a song calls for it. After Nora Jean, a quick move to the second stage led to the quite different female vocal spheres of Kat Riggins. Already her body language hinted at a totally diverse music domain compared to Nora Jean – more soul-r&b-funk stylings similar to Tina Turner.

The Norwegian old-school style band, Jelly Roll Men at the Café stage needed to be skipped due to time constraints to meet with with an old friend Bobby Rush and his dancer-singer Loretta Mizzlowe. On stage, Bobby was his normal self, although 'normal' is a wrong phrase in context with this legendary artist. Bobby had celebrated his 87th birthday (although there's some contradiction about his age) just couple days before the performance – the entire cheering audience quite rightly acknowledged this.

All the ingredients of a perfect Bobby Rush show were there: eye-catcher female dancers, Bobby's under the belt lyrics and associated chat and interaction with the audience, with a special focus on teasing some of the male spectators who had their lady partners next to them. Groovy and funky soulful Bobby Rush songs were on the bill, as well as down home



Lil' Ed © Pertti Nurmi.



Nora Jean © Pertti Nurmi.

blues accompanied by his harmonica playing, including the chromatic. The only thing missing that comes to mind was the absence of his guitar playing. It's totally astonishing how a man of Bobby's age can manoeuvre at the pace he did on stage. A minor quibble was the absence of his regular drummer, whose replacement couldn't quite fill the space, was too loud and, consequently, received critical looks from guitarist Kenny Knights and bassist Arthur Cooper.

Next on stage was the Scandinavian band, Trickbag, who base their music on early rock & roll and r&b and blues, with singer Tommy Moberg moving around the stage with turbo speed supported by the outstanding Finnish guitarist Tomi Leino and an excellent trio.

Rick Estrin And The Nightcats were the final act to finish the festivities. Singer and harmonica player Rick Estrin is of course a long timer, having built his early career as front man of Little Charlie & The Nightcats and writing witty lyrics for the band with an output of ten albums for the Alligator label. For over ten years guitar honours have been carried by the super-



Kat Riggins © Pertti Nurmi.

talented ex-Norwegian Kid Andersen. Latest addition to this super unit is the energetic drummer Derrick 'D'Mar' Martin, who has a highly respected CV in soul music circles.

Estrin has a highly personal singing style, and played awesome harmonica showing respect to likes of Little Walter but also showcasing his own inventive licks. D'Mar had his own ten-minute solo first making a somersault up front from behind his drum kit and then rampaging across the stage, syncopating with his sticks on all solid surfaces he could think of. That was pretty much the last highlight before reaching the end of the most outstanding blues festival of the year.

A final nod to the superb horn section, The Bender Brass, who were invited on stage to support several festival artists: Jimmy Carpenter, tenor sax, Mark Earley, baritone sax and Doug Woolverton, trumpet, gave extra punch to many of the acts. Blues Heaven Festival in 2022 takes place 11th-12th November. Let's meet there then.

Pertti Nurmi



Bobby Rush © Pertti Nurmi.



Rick Estrin © Pertti Nurmi.