

The Story Behind the Herndon Blues Fest

The Herndon Blues Fest was founded in 1997 as an event to preserve original blues genres. Former Council for the Arts director Karen Cobb, and president Chuck Curcio, along with Folk Club of Reston-Herndon president Ray Kaminsky conceived the idea in the fall of 1996 as an event that would celebrate diversity, be family-oriented, and be true to the roots of the music. Teaming with Yvonne Johnson of Fairfax County Parks Frying Pan Park, the festival organizers secured a venue that provided perfect logistics for the event and has remained its location to the present day.

The festival specializes in Piedmont and Delta blues styles, boogie-woogie piano and Gospel, and has become renowned across the country as one of the very few exclusively acoustic blues festivals. Kaminsky was introduced to Piedmont blues, a complex fingerstyle with the thumb playing alternating bass and fingers playing the melody lines and runs, by Smithsonian National Treasure John Jackson in 1979, while booking John for a restaurant music event. John Jackson became a mentor to Ray, introduced him to many of the legendary acoustic players, and encouraged Ray to study with the masters at the Davis-Elkins College Blues Week program. John became the keystone performer for the Blues Fest, performing in four of the first five festivals, and encouraging many other nationally renowned performers to support and perform for the event. When John passed away in 2002, the 6th Annual Blues Fest was dedicated to him, with National Heritage Award and W.C. Handy winners John Cephas and Phil Wiggins headlining the event.

Delta Blues, the style of playing the guitar with a bottleneck slide and in a number of open tunings, is another important blues style for the festival. The first Delta style player that was booked was Scott Ainslie, who transcribed all of Robert Johnson's work in the book "Robert Johnson - at the Crossroads, The Authoritative Guitar Transcriptions" and also on video. Chuck Curcio originally introduced his old Boy Scout friend Scott to Ray for a Folk Club performance in 1994. Interestingly, Scott made the decision to perform blues professionally when he saw John Jackson perform at a high school concert. They became fast friends and performed at numerous festivals and concerts events over the years.

Boogie-woogie piano, that raucous driving style with that solid bass line, has been another featured genre of the Blue Fest. Such great players as Ann Rabson of Sapphire - The Uppidity Blues Women, Judy Luis-Watson with her husband Paul Watson and the group BluesWorks have performed for the event. This year, Daryl Davis, who has performed with such luminaries as Chuck Berry, Bo Diddly and Pinetop Perkins, will be the featured pianist. The Gospel genre was the headline performance in 2001 with Ethel Caffie-Austin, West Virginia's First Lady of Gospel, providing a moving performance that had everyone be a part of the chorus.

Since its inception, The Blues Fest has been supported by the DC Blues Society, who has helped advertise the event and provide great profiles of the artists. The Fest is also pleased to team with the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation who support the same preservation values and provide many wonderful artists who perform these styles of blues.

The 8th Herndon Blues Fest will be held Saturday, July 24, 2004, at Frying Pan Park, 2709 West Ox Road in Herndon from noon to 8pm. Opening the show is Piedmont player Frank Fotusky, another John Jackson disciple. The Archie Edwards group will then present a whole cast of performers and blues styles. Neil Harpe (who I believe is the best player of Mississippi John Hurt styles that I have ever heard) will team with his partner Rick Franklin. Next up is Gaye Adegbalola, lead vocalist of Sapphire – The Uppidity Blues Women, ably accompanied by pianist Roddy Barnes. Reverend Robert B. Jones, who appeared at 5th Blues Fest, performs Delta styles with a fondness for Son House, and Piedmont styles. Closing the show will be Paul Rishell and Annie Raines, winners of the W.C. Handy Award for Best Acoustic Blues Album for "Moving to the Country". Paul learned his trade playing with such legends as

Son House, Johnny Shines and Howlin' Wolf, and is an amazing guitarist and signature vocalist. Annie Raines is recognized as one of today's top harmonica players, and has performed with such legends as James Cotton, and recorded with Rory Block, Pinetop Perkins and Susan Tedeschi. Annie also plays mandolin, keyboards and sings.

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