



Winning blues

MONTEREY'S BLUES AT ELEVEN WON THEIR WAY ONTO THE MAIN STAGE AT THIS YEAR'S MONTEREY BAY BLUES FESTIVAL

By **BETH PEERLESS**
Herald Correspondent

Blues music is all about winning and losing, but it seems mostly it's about losing.

Losing love, losing self-respect, losing money, just losing it, ya know? But when it comes to the band Blues at Eleven, the key word is winning. Not like Charlie Sheen winning, but like winning the 2010-11 Monterey Bay Blues Festival's Battle of the Blues Bands.

Following its debut performance at the festival last year, the local blues-based band entered the annual competition, made the cut from the initial 150 entrants to the final 12, and against the odds, find themselves set to play the Main Stage Saturday morning due to taking first place, otherwise known as winning the whole deal.

Ironically, the band will be playing blues at 11. Well,

BLUES FESTIVAL

- ▶ **What:** Blues at Eleven at the Monterey Bay Blues Festival
- ▶ **Where:** Monterey Fairgrounds, 2004 Fairground Road, Monterey
- ▶ **When:** 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m., Saturday, June 25 on the main stage; also 2:10-3:40 p.m. Saturday on the Presidents Stage
- ▶ **Tickets:** Various prices, available at 1-866-558-4253 or online at montereyblues.com
- ▶ **Information:** 394-2652, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Mon.-Fri., or email Tickets@MontereyBlues.com



Monterey blues band Blues at Eleven plays Saturday morning on the main stage and later that afternoon on the Presidents Stage at the Monterey Bay Blues Festival

they play at 11:30 a.m. to be exact. They follow up with an appearance on the Presidents Stage at 2:10 p.m. The path to this year's festival started several years ago when the original three members (collectively known as the Groovehounds) split from another of this area's finest blues bands, Red Beans & Rice, to concentrate on keyboardist Tom Lawson's original material. The result was a record titled "Blues at Eleven."

The material from the record was begging to be heard live, and so Lawson, drummer Jamey DeMaria and bassist Joe Vallaire set out to develop the total package.

They recruited Vallaire's brother Bill, a legendary Northern California guitarist with strong roots in jazz and

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blues.

They turned to Berklee School of Music graduate Tamas Marius to play alto and tenor saxophone. His songwriting and recording background was also a helpful addition.

And when it came to finding a lead vocalist, his strong stage presence and background in rock and blues made Troy O'Shann a natural.

"I bring a rock edge to the blues band," O'Shann said in an interview over coffee in downtown Monterey. "To me it's a good thing. It's got a

different edge, and kind of an original sound. Our guitar player is on the jazz and blues side, like a Robben Ford. Then you have a sax player and a keyboard player that are very New Orleans. 'Sick and Tired' (from the group's freshly pressed CD 'Leavin' You') has a New Orleans feel. 'Hey Pocky Way,' the Meters' tune, is definitely got that second-line groove. I'm more the Gary Moore, Joe Bonamassa side to the group."

The 13-song recording was produced and arranged by DeMaria, with additional

work in that area contributed by Lawson, Joe Vallaire and Richard Bryant, the disc's recording engineer.

Recorded with Bryant at Franklin Street Studios in Monterey, the CD also features musical contributions by conga and timbale player Andy Sierra, harmonica player Harpin' Jonny, and background vocals filled out by Bryant and Lauri Hofer Romero. Bryant and DeMaria did the mixing, while Vince Sanchez mastered the recording.

"One thing I noticed about the folks in the audience at the Battle of the Bands," said O'Shann, "is they want to see a show. I've heard people say they voted for us because we put on a show."

His background in rock, with the bands Honey Hush and Victory Lane, among others in the past, and currently with the group Rod, makes O'Shann a perfect front man for the six-man operation.

With flowing long wavy blond locks and rugged good looks, he presents something of a Robert Plant-style appearance. The intensity of his delivery and flamboyant way about the stage also adds to the entertainment factor that blues fans love.

While Lawson's original material was what filled an earlier release, "Leavin' You" is primarily filled with classic blues material. The only Lawson-written tune is the title cut, a blues shuffle that has the word "Baby" tacked on the end of it.

The Otis Rush-penned "All Your Love," with the definitive version recorded by John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers when guitarist Eric Clapton was in

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the band, is one of the great tunes included.

It's followed by the James Brown classic "Cold Sweat," which really cooks, more like a screaming rock tune than the funky original. The horn solo section, though, gives it the flair needed per the great Brown's backing band that included Maceo Parker.

"Who Do You Love," the song written by and made famous by Bo Diddley, has a real funky edge to it, as it should, but Lawson's Hammond B-3 solo turn really gives it some juice, his vocals working just right with the call and response of the backup singers.

That's followed by the bass drum thumping out the familiar jungle beat that will get anyone up and dancing, with Vallaire's guitar solo taking a cue from Jeff Beck before stretching out a bit, growling and singing alternately.

Vallaire's guitar playing really heats up when it comes to the last two cuts on the CD, "Further On Up the Road" and the Carl Verheyen-written "New Year's Day."

O'Shann has that nasty-sounding rock sneer to his vocals that really makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck.

This group has many strengths, and with the recording sounding so good, one can only imagine that its live performances at the 26th annual Monterey Bay Blues Festival will be killing.

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