

Annual Little Chicago Blues Festival comes to Down Home, hosts 16 bands

By: Jon DeBerry

Date: 5/1/06

The 16th annual **Little Chicago Blues Festival** kicked off at Johnson City's Down Home last weekend. Sixteen bands blew into town beginning on Thursday, April 27, and lasting into early Sunday morning, all to raise money for 89.5 WETS-FM. Johnson City's own **Bleu Jackson and the Hitmen** played along with bands from as far away as Mississippi and North Carolina. WETS's own **Wayne Winkler** provided services as stage announcer and local radio promoter between bands.

"This is the 16th year we've done this, and it's just gotten better every year," said Winkler. "This area's got a lot of local talent, [and] we do this to kind of celebrate our local talent." Johnny House, lead guitarist for **The Nightcrawlers**, best explained the nature of blues as "not something that you play - it's something that you feel." Empty seats were hard to come by all three nights as crowds packed into the dimly lit, wooden confines of the Down Home. Audiences cheered loudly for the grainy, energetic vocals of locals Bleu Jackson and Bobby Knight.



Traveling bands like **The Hoodoos** and The Nightcrawlers were equally well received amidst loud whistles and cheers. Improvisation was the word, and bands rocked out with solos on guitar, harmonica, saxophone, dobro and even washboard. Micol Davis of **Blue Mother Tupelo** even transformed the tambourine into a legitimate instrument with her syncopated shaking and Janis Joplin-esque stage presence. Good guitar licks were as plentiful as cold cups of beer, and rare was the audience member not tapping a foot or two on the wood plank floors.

Tribute was paid by the bands to the roots of blues with covers of Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, B.B. King and even Ray Charles.

There were lots of songs about women:

*Sweet little angel, Lord, I say
spread your wings and fly for me.*

*There was at least one song about a rooster:
Have ya'll seen my little red rooster?
Won't you please drive him home.
There were even songs about the blues:
Blues is my business,
and business is good.*

Ricky Davis of Blue Mother Tupelo even claimed to have received a song in a dream. "In my dream I was at a Salmon Dave concert, and Salmon Dave was singing this song," Davis said onstage. The festival historically has occurred on the last weekend of April and came this year right in the middle of Merle Fest (another local festival) and final exams.

The crowd demographic was almost void of ETSU students. One of the few students present at the festival cited WETS for clueing her in. "I heard about [the festival] on WETS." Johnny House had high praise for the festival and the Down Home. "Tennessee is great," he said. "I think we found the best kept secret in Tennessee."

Many WETS listeners may have heard recently of the radio station's fundraising campaign, but the station has been running the same financial booster for years now to cover the 38 percent gap in federal funding. "I think we're gonna be OK," said Winkler of the station's financial situation. "We've been around for 32 years. "We've paid our bills." For the time being, WETS has avoided the under-funded blues with another successful Little Chicago Blues Festival, one of Johnson City, Tennessee's annual entertainment highlights.