

Mood indigo

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The word is out! They're going to be "getting down" at the Eccles Center for the Performing Arts come Saturday night. It's about the "Blues" and the legacies of W. C. Handy and Charlie Patton and Robert Johnson and Son House and Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf and John Lee Hooker and hundreds of other practitioners of the musical art.

Saturday's gig will feature four rather fine examples of the genre performing under the banner of the W. C. Handy All Stars—this following by a mere 48 hours the 25th Annual Blues Foundation music awards in Memphis, called the "Handys" as opposed to the "Grammys." W. C. is called the father of the blues. He was the cat who, rather than having invented them, provided transcription and annotation and, thereby, introduced the new style to a worldwide audience. His "Memphis Blues" and "St. Louis Blues" became standards by which others are still judged.

The Handy All-Stars evolve or, rather, revolve among past winners and an individual's ability to tour within a given time-frame. Celebrating the vitality of the blues on-stage for this go-around will be a most meritorious foursome made up of John Hammond, Duke Robillard, Alvin Youngblood Hart, and Otis Taylor. One might say that Hammond came from a musical family, in that his father, the noted producer John Hammond, was responsible for "discovering" Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Billie Holliday, Robert Johnson, Bessie Smith, Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, Pete Seeger, and Bruce Springsteen, among others. Quite the creative quiver!

"Young" John Hammond, with his 40th year of performing and recording now securely in his rear-view mirror, exudes the blues in the manner of the legends he so faithfully interprets. His acoustic and "National Steel" guitar work are as finely honed as any.

And the manner in which he gets inside the songs, well, let's just say he lives them. His body language and facial expressions alone are worth the price of admission. And then there is his vocal delivery. Suffice to say, he does not sugar-coat it for the untrained ear. Did I mention his wicked grin?

Duke Robillard is as user-friendly and as pleasing a guitarist as one is likely to come across. When he arrived at virtuosity, he just walked right on through the next door. His blues, as his jazz and swing and rockabilly and rock & roll, is a massage to the senses. It never rubs the wrong way.

Duke's latest CD, a tribute to the wondrous music of T-Bone Walker and titled "Blue Mood," is scheduled for a June release. Robillard has kept the T-Bone guitar and vocal flame burning brightly over the years and to say the upcoming release date is highly anticipated would be a gross understatement. T-Bone Walker was an artist, and in Duke Robillard's case, it takes one to know one!

There is also anticipation on this end to finally catch Alvin Youngblood Hart and Otis Taylor in person. They've both been around the blues scene for a spell and have garnered much recognition, including Handy awards, from their peers. They also each have a Park City connection.

Hart played the Egyptian for Mountain Town Stages last year and, as a reward for a fine effort, Randy Barton acquired him a tour of our fair burg in Gayle Dahl's taxi. Some people have all the luck. Taylor was singled out for a Composition Fellowship from the Sundance Institute a few years back and hung out a bit at the Film Festival.

This fine blues extravaganza harkens back to when Park City was a semi-regular stop for blues package-tours. There was a time when local blues fans would "jones" over the impending arrival of such legends as Muddy Waters, B. B. King, Buddy Guy, James Cotton, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, and Dr. John.

The form and the lifestyle flat gets in your brain and in your walk and in your talk and under your skin. Be it the Delta Blues, or the Country Blues, or the Jump Blues, or the Texas Blues, or the Chicago Blues, it makes you wiggle and swagger and shout and attempt to climb out of whatever dark hole you find yourself in.

The blues is and the blues are. The blues is a ramble and a juke joint and a big-bottomed mama and a huge river running smack down the cultural center of 20th Century Americana. The blues are "bent pitches" and call-and-response and crossroads where devils trade souls for virtuosity, if not virtue.

The blues is a state of melancholy for which the antidote, the prescription for healing, is the blues, the music form.

Or as B. B. King says, "the blues is an expression of anger against shame and humiliation." The blues set you right! The blues is food for the soul and spirit. The blues is a style of music evolved from the southern black secular songbook. Desire, loneliness, tenderness, and other manifestations of unrequited love have long made themselves at home on the porch of the blues—as have betrayal and hunger and passion and chaos.

And, music-wise, these are just a few of the players that, within the many nuances of melody and rhythm, stretch unresolved tension to near its breaking point. It's in the vibrant execution of this form, however, that, over time, resolves this tension and so captures our imagination.

What the blues are is a flat-out gas! They are a shower on the inside. They clean out the carbon and tune-up your mindset. They cause your hands to clap and your vocal chords to stretch. They are who we really are.