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Countdown is on for 2018 Aurora Winter Blues Festival

By Brock Weir

Temperatures may have plummeted again after a midweek warm spell, but heat will soon be in the air.
The Aurora Winter Blues Festival is set to return once again this February with a month-long series of events designed to bring some ?hot blues? to our cold nights.
Benefiting Blue Door Shelters, CHATS (Community & Home Assistance to Seniors), and Music Aurora's ?Youth in Music? program, the seventh annual festival will present ?Journeymen Blues,? featuring the line-up of Steve Strongman, Jack De Keyzer and Michael Schatte at St. Andrews College on Friday, February 23.
This ?killer lineup? will be followed the next evening with a ?throwback tribute? to the album Mad Dogs & Englishmen, saluting the music of Joe Cocker and Leon Russell, with special guests The Dan McKinnon Band.
That, however, is just the main course.
There will be plenty of appetizers throughout the month of February to whet your appetite, the first being February 3 from 7 ? 11 p.m. with the annual Blues Bash, held again this year in the showroom of Highland Automotive professionals.
?This year, the Blues Bash will showcase Sons of Rhythm,? says Music Aurora's Greg Smith, who launched this year's Festival at the Aurora Public Library with Aurora Winter Blues Festival (AWBF) co-founder Jamie Macdonald. ?I think people will love their energy and people will be up on the dance floor absolutely loving those guys. For me, that is going to be a personal highlight. It's a very local, grassroots kind of evening with local talent and a great way to support our local charities. If you're coming for the first time, come out on February 3 to get a taste of what the Aurora Winter Blues Festival is all about.?
The 2018 Blues Bash will see some changes from previous years. In the past, the event has put on two stages of music throughout the dealership, but this will be consolidated into one large main space next month showcasing both the pros, and the local youth talent who have become a mainstay of the party.
The party continues Saturday, February 10 with a free guitar workshop from 10 ? 11.30 a.m. in the Magna Room of the Aurora Public Library, hosted in conjunction with The Arts Music Store and, next door in the Lebovic Room, a free song-writing workshop at the same time.
Festivities shift over to the Aurora Cultural Centre on Thursday, February 15 where the seven-time Juno-nominee Ken Whiteley takes the stage with Freedom Blues, a menu of songs set to ?address both contemporary and historical struggles for the freedom endemic to a healthy, progressive society.?
Music will then blow the roof off the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion on February 17 when Soul Benefit, featuring Steve Falk and Friends, will host a dance to benefit the Legion's ongoing Raise the Roof Campaign.
All throughout this time, pop-up performances will be taking place courtesy of the 33 1/3 Record Store at Bayview Avenue and Hollidge Boulevard.
The popular record store is a first-time partner with the AWBF and both parties are excited about the new relationship.
?They have come on as a sponsor this year and it will be exciting because they will be at the Festival theatres on the Friday and Saturday with a wide selection of vinyl from the Blues genre and patrons will be able to browse and look at some amazing vinyl,? says Mr. Smith.
Which brings us back to the main course.
St. Andrew's College will be the setting for the Aurora Winter Blues Festival proper on Friday, February 23 and Saturday, February 24.
?Journeymen will bring together three top Canadian male blues artists who have paved the way for many people in the blues industry to make a living,? says Mr. Smith of De Keyzer, Schatte and Strongman. ?They are on the road and perform 200-plus nights a year and are very active, very talented individuals. On Saturday, with a tribute to Joe Cocker, Leon Russell and their album Mad Dogs & Englishmen, we will have a 13-piece band with some of the top performers in Canada in the blues industry.?
This all-star line-up on the Saturday will be opened by The Dan McKinnon Band.
?St. Andrew's College has been a phenomenal partner,? says Mr. Smith. ?We had a few technical challenges last year, which have been addressed, and they have been very open to working with us in terms of the technical programming of their equipment to provide an even better experience for our patrons this year. We hope everything will be bigger and better than it was last year!?

For more information on the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, including dates, times and tickets for the Blues Bash, main stage events,

and everything in between, visit www.awbf.ca.