

JW-Jones to put fresh spin on traditional sounds at Aurora Winter Blues Festival

By Brock Weir

His musical journey started on the drums, but when 15-year-old JW-Jones first saw B.B. King perform in 1995, it was a watershed moment. He put down the drumsticks, picked up a guitar and mastered the sound of traditional blues, the sounds of his musical heroes.

Now, however, the Juno-nominated musician is connecting with audiences by turning traditional blues on its ear, and is set to bring his music back to Aurora next month as one of the headliners of the 2019 Aurora Winter Blues Festival.

JW-Jones will hit the Theatre Aurora stage on Friday, March 15, in a program that includes the award-winning Jerome Godboo Band.

"My favourite thing about playing these venues is you can see the faces, and when you seep people, you can engage with them directly," says Jones. "You feel more connected. I find I look at bigger audiences and think of it as one, but the key thing for us is to be able to interact with them and we can play with the dynamics a lot more, which we all enjoy."

It is this interaction with the audience that prompted Jones and his band to change gears somewhat.

When he first set out as a musician with his guitar in hand, he wanted to make music his heroes would be proud of. That is still a guiding force for them, but it's now served up with a twist.

"After nine records, we went into doing this live album and that's where things started to change," Jones explains. "I wanted to get out of the box I was doing, crank up some overdrive and do some crazy stuff, Jimi Hendrix inspired, going back to the roots and not worrying so much about whether the super-traditional players I admire would love it or not. I was doing it because the crowds were reacting and it felt really good to me."

This new approach was exemplified in their 2016 album *High Temperature*, which aimed to capture this sound.

"To me, blues is everything from hardcore traditional Chicago and Texas blues, it is just 12-bar firm, really just playing from the heart and playing super-traditional sounds and not over-driven and really honing into the sounds of Chess Records, Cobra and what all those guys were doing back then," he says. "Now, when I think about how to make Blues sound original, the only way is to have really great lyrics and keep the form, or change the form and change the lyrics to go along with it. There are only so many ways to say, 'My baby left me' over 12-bar blues."

That is certainly a theme JW-Jones tends to deviate from in his work, but his music is no less personal. Recent albums such as *On Belmont Boulevard* and *High Temperature*, include deeply meaningful songs such as "Who Am I?" and "Cocaine Boy."

"Both of those dig deeply into my past and my childhood," he says. "Those were very liberating songs for me because I was finally writing about real, real stuff that happened to me that I was kind of afraid of and ashamed to talk about before that."

While JW-Jones taps into his lived experience to inform his music, he focuses on this feeling of liberation and aims to deliver a really high energy show to Aurora audiences, ultimately getting people up on their feet and dancing in the aisles of the Henderson Drive performance space.

"We want to do things on stage that they have never seen before," he says. "We want to take them to places sonically and musically where they have never been, and work with the dynamics. There are so many bands out there that are really incredible, but they don't necessarily bring the dynamics down to whisper quiet and that is one thing we like to do because it brings everybody in and the focus just changes in the room completely. That's a big part of it, but overall we just want to have a good time and leave them with a memorable show where they can go off and say, 'Holy cow, we have never seen that before.'"

To get a taste of a kind of music that you just might not have heard before, tickets for the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, which takes place March 15 and 16 at Theatre Aurora, are on sale now. For more information, including tickets, visit musicaurora.ca/blues-festival.