

Legendary band tunes up for Aurora Winter Blues Festival



By Brock Weir

Next week, the man dubbed 'the father of Canadian blues' will be sitting down with his bandmates to learn a few new songs ? and it's all for an Aurora audience.

Well, it's for a new album, but Donnie Walsh and his Downchild Blues Band will be debuting a few of these tunes to the public next week as they headline the Aurora Winter Blues Festival.

The Legendary Downchild Blues Band will hit the stage at St. Andrew's College next Friday as part of the 'Masters of the Blues,' which features special guest The Spencer Mackenzie Band.

'I'll be learning some new songs the day before that in Toronto!' says Walsh, whose take on Flip, Flop and Fly, and numerous other tunes, earned them a place in Canadian music history.

Mr. Walsh says he and the Band are looking forward to playing the Aurora Winter Blues Festival (AWFB) after a storied career of nearly 50 years in the business.

When Mr. Walsh formed the band in 1969, Blues festivals were few and far between. Sure, there were a few clubs that specialized in the special sound, but as the years go by, these night spots have given way to the larger audiences of the festivals.

'There is a bigger audience by far,' says Walsh. 'When you go and play the blues for an audience, the whole idea is to get from 'blue' to 'not blue' through the music and the music draws that out. I couldn't get enough of it as a kid and it was totally with me all the time. There is an old quote from [singer and guitarist] Big Bill Broozny that when you wake up in the morning and you are really down, you pick up the guitar and play it for a while and get cheered up or feel better. Blues has an effect on people that way, whether you are listening to it or playing it.'

Downchild bassist Gary Kendall says he had the same feeling as a teen. He grew up listening to artists like Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley, who each had an elusive sound. He had to know more, he says.

'I didn't really know where their music was coming from and they were bringing something new into the world,' says Mr. Kendall. 'As a young musician, I realised if I wanted to be a real musician, I had to develop an interest in all styles of music. I would listen to anything and late at night, when I was a kid growing up in Northern Ontario, it was terrible ? you would hear a schmaltzy tune like How Much Is That Doggie in the Window and the next thing you hear would be Elvis singing Hound Dog then back to more schmaltz.'

Yet, he persevered forming a name for himself in the scene. His first stint as a member of Downchild lasted from 1979 to 1983. He returned to the band in 1995 and has been a member ever since.

'I think myself and other band members share the same feeling towards music and the blues in general,' says Mr. Kendall. 'We all started when we were very young being blues fans and we're really interested in this non-mainstream style of music. Back when we started, if you wanted to hear some blues, you really had to dig for it. Things shifted in the late 1970s and 180s when blues started to be included in jazz festivals and the odd blues festival started popping up and it grew from there.'

?Even though we have been around for a long time, it is always important for us to get to new people that maybe will be seeing the band for the first time and reach out to people who have been coming to see our band for the last 48 years. If there is anything our appearance can do to add to, or help boost the profile of the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, that is important as well.?

The Sixth Annual Aurora Winter Blues Festival will take place February 24 and 25 at St. Andrew's College in addition to Downchild and the Spencer Mackenzie Band on Friday's ?Masters of the Blues Bill?, Saturday, February 25 is ?Lady Plays Guitar? featuring the Sue Foley Band, the Suzie Vinnick Band and the Cecile Doo-Kingue Band. Tickets are available from www.awbf.ca.