

Aurora set for musical revival as Winter Blues Festival returns to community



Local music lovers know that few things warm the cold winter nights better than hot jazz and good company.

For the last five years, winters around here have been a little bit chilly without the blues to go around, but February is shaping up to be a scorcher as the Aurora Winter Blues Festival rises from the ashes of a COVID pause with a hand from the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Music Aurora, long-time proponents of the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, have formally passed the torch to the Aurora Cultural Centre to put the Festival back on the map ? and the results are four days of entertainment spanning six shows and four live blues workshops between February 26 and March 1.

?I think of all the hard work that was put in by [former Aurora residents] Jamie and Helen Macdonald to build this up, it's nice to see it coming back,? says Music Aurora's Greg Smith.

Adds Music Aurora's Stewart McLaren: ?The love of music and then the fun of putting the event on was the main thing that drove it.?

The Aurora Winter Blues Festival grew significantly since the Macdonalds founded it as a live music party in their own home. It was soon too big for one home to handle and branched out to various venues in the community for both key concerts and pop-ups, including Theatre Aurora and St. Andrew's College.

Pop-ups associated with Aurora Winter Blues Festival also took place within the Aurora Cultural Centre's historic Church Street School, and now that the school is at the heart of Aurora Town Square, the new edition of the Festival will be something of a homecoming.

Opening the lineup on Thursday, February 26 will be Jack De Keyzer, who will take over the Aurora Town Square Performance Hall at 7.30 p.m. The music continues the following evening, also at 7.30 p.m., with Suzie Vinnick, featuring special guests Kevin Breit, Tony D., and Jay Blues.

Glenn Marais' Jook is up next on Saturday, February 28, at 1 p.m., followed by Dominique Fils-Aime that evening at 7.30 p.m., and on Sunday, March 1 with Harrison Kennedy and Dave Mowat at 2 p.m., concluding with Little Magic Sam Band at 7.30 p.m.

?When Greg and Stewart gave me the green light, we began putting things in place for the four days that are running, replicating as much as we could [of the original Aurora Winter Blues Festival] under this roof ? and it's a brand-new roof,? says Derek Andrews, Performing Arts Producer for the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Andrews is no stranger to Blues. A long-time producer at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, he was also tapped to emcee a few Aurora Winter Blues Festival shows over the years, having first taken in the Festival first when it was still a house party.

?I think Blues music is accessible ? people have heard the Blues whether you know it or not,? says Andrews. ?When you hear Etta James on the soundtrack of a movie, it's not necessarily telling you it's Etta James, but there she is, leaving her imprint. Blues is the bedrock of rock, jazz, and country, and it's highly influential to a lot of other styles of music.?

The program, he adds, is all-Canadian with most of the performers hailing from Ontario.

?I think the lineup is excellent,? says Smith. ?Having some local artists as well as people from across Ontario, it's a really strong lineup and it's going to be a very busy four days here at the Centre. It's great to see that the Aurora Winter Blues Festival will be revived. York Region has a really strong Blues patronage and a lot of people from all over the GTA have come to the Aurora Winter Blues Festival in the past, so I think we're going to look forward to many of those same people, if not more, coming again.?

Adds McLaren: ?Treat it as a night out and maybe discover something new, rediscover something from the past, and enjoy the programming because there's a lot of effort and some great talent.?

For more information on the 2026 Aurora Winter Blues Festival, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca/awbf2026.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter