

Aurora Winter Blues fest will put spotlight on young singers



By Brock Weir

Some argue that to really sing the blues you need to have really lived, but that is not an adage adhered to by organizers of the Aurora Winter Blues Fest as they bring together the best and the brightest young York Region talent to be a part of this year's party.

Organizers will kick off their Aurora Winter Blues Festival Youth in Music Program on the evening of Thursday, March 6 as part of their first annual Blues Bash, a kick-off event for the third annual festival itself.

Following the kick-off on the Thursday, the fun continues on the Friday and Saturday as the Youth Showcase of the Bands extends to Jonathan's Restaurant and King Richard's English Pub each night from 8 ? 9 p.m.

This year, the program will be held in partnership between the Festival (AWBF), The Arts Music Store, and NorthTown Music and Art Wars, bringing together a much more extensive youth program than a simple one-night-only affair.

?We wanted to champion youth through our festival and start giving these kids a venue to play so they can showcase their bands,? says Jamie Macdonald, who co-founded the festival with his wife, Helen Gushue. ?We are taking the program back into the high schools and providing financial supports for the purchase of instruments because there is a definite need in the area.?

Partnering with NorthTown, which also strives to provide youth these opportunities, not only for music but in visual art as well, they are joining forces so as to not go head-to-head competing for youth bands as they had in the past ? and their appearance as part of the AWBF will be their first springboard into a lengthy competition running through May.

Running through the Battle of the Bands, the finals will be held Friday, May 23, at Theatre Aurora in an event sponsored by the AWBF.

?We thought it would be great working together,? said Josh Gottlieb of North Town. ?Our opening event was the same as their youth showcase and we were finding it was conflicting. Being community minded as we are, trying to partner with different groups and promote the arts, the songs that people are writing and performing, but are their own works and not covers, Jamie came to us and said, how can we work together??

Collaborating in extending the youth music component outside of the Aurora Winter Blues Festival and into a school setting is The Arts Music Store, which will co-host free Youth Music Workshops for vocals and the ukulele on Saturday, March 8 at 1 p.m. at the Aurora Cultural Centre. This is the second year the store has participated in the Festival and for store owner Patty Keele, the

education component was right up their alley.

"We have a huge commitment to music education," she says. "We have about 1,200 people in our music program between Newmarket and Aurora and we always participate in community events that involve youth as much as we can. Jamie asked us if we could be a little more active this year and we are happy to help out."

Performers taking part in the Youth Music Showcase have also been selected from bands stemming out of The Arts' Rock Band summer camp, handpicked to showcase the cream of the crop.

"We are happy to showcase the talent wherever we can," says Ms. Keele, noting groups coming out of the program have already made inroads performing at such events as the Newmarket Farmers' Market, the Newmarket jazz+ Festival, as well as the Youth Music Extravaganza held last summer at the Aurora Community Centre as part of Aurora's Sesquicentennial Celebrations. "Aurora, Newmarket, and Bradford is such an amazing plethora of musical talent and we are at the Centre of that. That is why we are here. The younger we can get guitars into kids' hands, the happier we are."

One of these (former) youngsters who got his start at The Arts is Graham Young, a 17-year-old student at Newmarket's Dr. Denison High School who will be performing as part of the AWBF Youth Showcase. Hot off the heels of his success this past summer as one of the openers of the Newmarket jazz+ Festival, he says he is looking forward to all opportunities that come his way.

"These opportunities mean a great deal because you can play as yourself," says Graham. "It is wicked because you can play the tunes you want to play. There will be three tunes [at the Festival next month] but I am thinking of just getting a trio together and playing some good music."

For more information on the Youth Showcase and the Aurora Winter Blues Festival itself, visit www.awbf.ca. Registration for the Youth Music Workshops can be done through The Arts at 905-898-7164.