

Blues Bash returns for milestone in new venue



By Brock Weir

The popular Aurora Winter Blues Festival celebrates an important milestone this year, but even after five years of endurance, this baby still has its new car smell.

On Saturday, March 5, the Aurora Winter Blues Festival (AWBF) takes over the showroom of Highland Automotive Professionals for a night of live music, art, and a chance to highlight the important work of the Festival's beneficiary charities, CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors) and Blue Door Shelters.

Featuring performances from Turbo Street Funk, among others, it is not only a way to give back, but serves as an appetizer for the following weekend where Aurora collectively sings the blues in venues across Town.

Previously held at the Aurora Cultural Centre, the annual Blues Bash is set to welcome even more people this year at their new spacious venue.

?The Blues Bash really focuses on our fundraising and building awareness for our causes,? says Jamie MacDonald, who co-founded the Festival with his wife, Helen Gushue, back when it was just a relatively small house party. ?To have this larger footprint through the support of Jennifer and her team at Highland Automotive Professionals is just great.?

With their larger footprint, the AWBF is excited to bring back their Showcase of the Bands, a spin on a Battle of the Bands format featuring young and up-and-coming musicians.

?We give them a showcase with professional staging and lighting, sound, and all that,? says Mr. MacDonald. ?This is going back to our roots. With the youth bands, these are paid gigs for them as well. You see the kids' faces light up when you pass them that envelope at the end of the night.

?We have had a couple of the youth bands turn the envelopes back to us and say, ?put it to the cause.' It speaks about community here. We are thrilled about working with Highland. It is going to be a great party this year and we can't ask for more.?

Unless you have been staying home these past few, cold weekends, chances are you've already experienced a flavour of what the Blues Bash and the Festival itself will offer over the coming weeks through a number of pop-up performances at different venues. Earlier this month, pop-up performances lent a festive air to the opening of the latest exhibition from SOYRA (the Society of York Region Artists), which continues at the Aurora Cultural Centre, not to mention a series of performances at the Aurora Public Library as late as this past Saturday, which came on the heels of another pop-up at the Aurora Farmers' Market.

?This is our milestone year and when we started this thing one day we were just looking at a two-year [window] to see where that took us,? says Mr. MacDonald. ?Now, we're all excited about hitting this milestone and, more importantly, the recognition we received from Festivals & Events Ontario being voted one of the Top 100 festivals in the Province. It is really nice to get that recognition and, at the end of the day, people are recognizing the good we're doing in the community as well.

?[On the Festival itself] on our performance nights, this allows us to burst a few buttons from the programming perspective with the number of bands that have heard about us. This is now a destination for professional bands. They are saying this is one of the top festivals not only from the reception they get from the patrons who attend it, but the way they are treated by the organizers at this time of year as well. It is nice to be in a good situation where the bands are seeking us out now, and these are top bands across Canada. I just wish we had a bigger footprint and a bigger venue!

?At the end of the day, if we can expand into a bigger footprint, it is helping our bottom line, which goes back to our charitable benefactors at the end of the day.?

The Aurora Winter Blues Festival kicks off with the AWBF Blues Bash on Saturday, March 5 at Highland Automotive. The fun continues Friday, March 11 at Theatre Aurora with the first of two performance nights: ?Pound the Keys: Hammond B3 Organ Blues? featuring the Lance Anderson Band, the Matt Weidinger Band, and the Blackburn Brothers Band. ?Raise the Roof: Big Band Blues? takes over the Theatre Aurora stage on Saturday, March 12 with The Maple Blues Revue, featuring Dawn Tyler Watson, Chuck Jackson, John Mays, and The Maple Blues Band.

For tickets and further information, visit www.aurorawinterbluesfestival.ca.