

Cultural Centre launches summer countdown to Winter Blues

The blazing July sun is here, but the Aurora Cultural Centre's recently-launched 2026-2027 season has some cool blues on the horizon.

The Aurora Cultural Centre's latest Performing Arts season went on sale Thursday, and a hallmark of this year's program includes a return of the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, a long-standing local musical institution, which is looking forward to its second year revived under the Cultural Centre's umbrella.

The 2027 Aurora Winter Blues Festival will kick off on February 24 with an evening concert by Crystal Shawanda, supported by Brock Stonefish. The Centre describes Shawanda as "one of the most electrifying voices in Canadian music."

"A JUNO Award-winner and former country star turned blues powerhouse, she brings her soulful artistry to Aurora," they said. "Joining her is Brock Stonefish, Delaware Nation luthier and winner of the 2023 Toronto Blues Society Talent Search. Together, they celebrate Indigenous roots and the deep, shared soul of the Blues."

The second concert in the series is Matt Andersen, supported by Campbell & Johnston, on February 25. Previously announced by the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Andersen concert is part of their recently-launched Gold Circle concert series.

"A powerful giant in performance, Matt Andersen leaves it all on stage in an incredible display of energy, songcraft and guitar prowess. Audiences are left breathless from his full tilt blues roots renditions of original material. A consummate performer, he will move your heart with his honest, no holds barred emotion, humour and charm. Supporting the night with an opening set are rising stars Campbell & Johnston, the guitar virtuoso couple hailing from New Brunswick and PEI."

The Blues continue on February 26 with Dawn Tyler Watson, supported by Danny Marks, a double set of concerts on February 27 with Rhapsodious at 3 p.m., and Terra Lightfoot, supported by Jay Blues, at 7.30 p.m.

"A 2020 JUNO Award winner for Blues Album of the Year, first-place champion at the International Blues Challenge in Memphis, and winner of over a dozen Maple Blues Awards and Quebec Lys Blues Awards, Watson is one of the most decorated blues artists in Canada," say organizers. "Her sound fuses jazz, soul, rock, and gospel into something that is entirely her own. Sharing the stage is legendary Toronto guitarist and JAZZfm91 broadcaster Danny Marks "an outstanding musician with a lifetime of blues in his hands."

"Settle in for a soulful afternoon with acclaimed pianist, former CBC broadcaster, and Culchahworks artistic director Andrew Craig. A specialist in original Canadian theatre and Black history, Craig has spent years developing work that explores the rich and often untold stories of Black culture and experience in Canada. For this Blues Series matinee, he brings the same depth of thought and emotional honesty to a solo set spanning jazz, gospel, funk, soul, and R&B, played with the fluency of a lifetime spent inside this music. His masterful touch on the keys creates an experience that is intimate and profound "music that tells a story."

"Terra Lightfoot has spent years earning a reputation as one of Canada's finest live performers "a touring rock songwriter with JUNO nominations, Polaris long-list nods, and a loyal following built one show at a time. Now, with her intimate new album Home Front "recorded in a Haliburton Highlands living room, on a back porch, in the quiet hours after dinner " she reveals a softer, more personal side. Nylon strings, field recordings, and songs shaped by stillness. An evening of music that gets to the very heart of what matters."

The program concludes with Lance Anderson's An Afternoon of Blues and Gospel, on February 28, at 2 p.m.

"Close out the Blues Series with a joyful, uplifting celebration where gospel and the blues meet in their most powerful form. Lance Anderson "piano and organ genius" and a beloved Mariposa Folk Festival fixture " leads a spectacular ensemble featuring powerful

vocalists Quisha Wint and Cheryl Luscom. Known for his masterful tributes to legends including Oscar Peterson and The Band, Anderson brings decades of musical excellence to this celebration of where gospel and the blues were born together. Joyful, soulful, and impossible not to move to.?

At a sneak peek of the 2027 Aurora Winter Blues Festival for Centre patrons and supporters held recently at Slabtown Armoury, Cultural Centre Executive Director Suzanne Haines said she was "so pleased" to work with Music Aurora, one of the original proponents of the AWBF, on this season's program "an appreciation that was echoed by Music Aurora's Stewart McLaren.

"It was more than just a series of concerts, it was a community event," he said of the first formal Blues Festival in 2012, which was born out of house parties hosted by Jamie and Helen MacDonald. "We had just one night". It became a festival in the fact we did lots of events other than just putting on performances. We engaged youth in music through performances and pop-ups around Town, and we held workshops in the Library and in different locations around Town?.

"We're thrilled to be back working with the Aurora Cultural Centre. Suzanne and Derek [Andrews, Performing Arts Manager] and our team have done a great job. Last year was a wonderful success. We had great performances, great shows. I think everybody enjoyed it. It was sold out, so we're very proud to be happy to partner with Aurora Winter Blues Fest and the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Town of Aurora, to put this on again.?"

Added Andrews: "It is a terrific story of revival, a word that we used and overused a little bit, but we carry on with the next edition of AWBF.?"

For more information about upcoming AWBF programming and the Centre's entire 2026-2027 Performing Arts Season, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca/performing-arts.

By Brock Weir
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