

Cultural Centre, Music Aurora launch countdown to Aurora Winter Blues Fest



Music was in the air at Slabtown Armoury on Wednesday night as the Aurora Cultural Centre kick-started the countdown to the 2026 Aurora Winter Blues Festival.

The first Aurora Winter Blues Festival since before the Global Pandemic, previous festival organizers Music Aurora have formally passed the baton to the Aurora Cultural Centre, which has developed an expansive lineup of live performances and educational workshops running February 26 ? March 1.

Among the artists set to appear at the 2026 Aurora Winter Blues Festival (AWBF) include Jack De Keyzer, Suzie Vinnick, Glenn Marais' Jook, Dominique Fils-Aime, Harrison Kennedy with Dave Mowat, and Little Magic Sam Band.

Those who braved the snow to take part in the January 21 launch event were treated to a number of musical sneak-peeks, including by Jay Blues, who will be appearing as a special guest during Vinnick's February 27 performance.

Welcoming attendees, Suzanne Haines, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre, said when the Cultural Centre first opened its doors in 2010 it made a conscious decision not to compete with the work of Music Aurora and steered away from programming Blues. However, they saw a gap when the AWBF was not among the events resurrected in the post-pandemic world.

?We hired [Programming Manager] Derek Andrews over the pandemic and at that point we were just looking for a general programmer,? said Haines. ?I said to him, not knowing his full history with the Blues, ?The only thing you can't program is Blues in Aurora.' Without a beat, he just kind of continued to have the conversation, didn't even push back or anything, took the job, and it was later I found out his real history with the Blues. I felt, ?Wow, that's amazing that you would come into this community, to program for this community, knowing you couldn't do the one thing that you love to do.'

?After the pandemic, we noticed the Blues Festival didn't emerge immediately and we had a great opportunity to sit down with [Music Aurora's] Greg Smith and Stuart McLaren in a local pub? and just talk to them about the possibilities of doing some Blues programming?. We continued the conversation about how Music Aurora could really breathe back into life and, really, the intention was to steward it forward. Here we are now in this really solid, incredible partnership with Music Aurora standing side-by-side and reviving this festival.?

This partnership, Haines concluded, has been ?foundational? in giving the Centre the ?confidence to really pull this together and bring this back to the community.?

This sentiment was returned by McLaren who shared the Festival's roots from a house party first started by Jamie Macdonald and Helen Gushue in their basement to an event that regularly sold out such venues as Theatre Aurora and St. Andrew's College.

?The foundation of the Aurora Winter Blues Festival was in the community. Jamie was adamant that live music needed to be supported, and he had a special appreciation for the Blues,? said McLaren. ?The foundation was live music that was going to be performed, promoted and put on by people around Town. We'd use local venues?we used local caterers, we used local breweries, which was very important to lubricate the social fabric? we had local businesses involved, restaurants would give discounts to people if they came to the show before or after, and bands would show up at their place in between sets. All in all, we were very local.

?Because of that success, and because of the good works of Suzanne and Derek? I'd like to say thank you to everyone at the Aurora Cultural Centre for helping us bridge the gap from COVID to today. I think it's going to be very successful with a great lineup.?

Despite his ?biting my tongue? on the Blues when he first met with Haines, Andrews says when the green light was given to proceed with reviving the AWBF, he ?unleashed? his genre knowledge to develop the program ? which, he said, is grounded by the ?strong heart? of Jack DeKeyser on opening night.

?I've asked Suzie Vinnick to do something special by bringing in a couple of guitar-slingers and Kevin Bright and Tony D are a couple of the best,? said Andrews. ?As we carry on, I went local with Glenn Marais doing his ?Jook' show. On Saturday night, we got our hands on Dominique Fils-Aimé because she is touring in the area. Dominique did a show for us and sold out St. Andrew's College. She's won the Jazz Vocal Juno twice, so she is a bit to the left side of Blues, so to speak. She's a very soulful Haitian heritage Montrealer, and that show will be really, really stellar. She's next in sales behind Jack, so that one's going to do very well as well.

?Then we kind of go traditional on Sunday afternoon with Harrison Kennedy, the 82-year-old Hamilton-based soul-singing Blues man who's won Junos and all kinds of awards in the States and Canada. Harrison is the real deal. Underground Railroad family, he was on Motown, the guys had a real life, and he's going to tell those stories when he comes and plays. The winners of the Blues Award for New Artist, Little Magic Sam, are closing out the Sunday night program.?

For more on the 2026 Aurora Winter Blues Festival, including the full lineup and ticket information, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca/awbf2026.

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