

Get ready for a full month of Blues as Aurora Winter Blues Fest grows



By Brock Weir

In February, where the days are short, the nights are long, and the flying snow gets everyone a little bit down, Aurora will have more reasons than ever before to sing the blues as the Aurora Winter Blues Festival ramps up the volume.

As the first snowfall of the season on Thursday gave an appetizer of things to come, organizers behind the Aurora Winter Blues Festival announced they are getting ready to serve up a whole plate next year, expanding the Festival to span the entire month of February.

‘We have been busy in the summer months and we came off our fifth annual [Festival] last year, which was a huge milestone for us,’ said Jamie Macdonald who co-founded the Festival with his wife, Helen, as a house party nearly two decades ago. ‘While it was a great festival, we put our heads together to say, ‘Where do we take it to the next level?’

One of the refrains they kept hearing was a need to expand from Theatre Aurora to a much larger venue.

Enter St. Andrew's College (SAC).

SAC's Ketchum Auditorium will be the host venue for the 2017 Aurora Winter Blues Festival, with headlining acts taking to the stage on Friday, February 24 and Saturday, February 25. Following an opening act by the up-and-coming Spencer Mackenzie Band, a youth band which opened Aurora's celebration of the Tragically Hip this past summer featuring Aurora's own Jack Davies, the February 24 event celebrates the ‘Masters of the Blues’ featuring the Downchild Blues Band.

The following evening it's all about girl power when the stage is taken over by ‘Lady Plays Guitar’ featuring the Sue Foley Band, the Suzie Vinnick Band, and the Cecile Doo-Kingue Band.

In any other year, this would be the main event. In 2017, however, this is the grand finale.

The party gets underway with the third annual Aurora Winter Blues Festival Blues Bash at Highland Automotive Professionals. This event, which turns the spotlight on local musicians, also serves to shine a light on the two organizations benefiting from the proceeds of the Aurora Winter Blues Festival: CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors) and Blue Door Shelters.

To date, the AWBF has raised over \$60,000 shared between the two groups.

‘We're getting bigger and better every year,’ said Mr. Macdonald. ‘In 2017, we are running something every weekend through February. Our Blues Bash was hosted by the Aurora Cultural Centre. It was a huge success, but sadly we left the venue because we outgrew the facility’

But, that was not the end of the relationship between the AWBF and the Aurora Cultural Centre. The Centre is back as a community partner for the upcoming Festival, playing host to the dynamic musical duo of Diana Braithwaite and Chris Whitley on February 10. ‘We are thrilled to help perpetuate the concept that February is Blues Month in Aurora,’ said Laura Schembri, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre. ‘It has grown from a weekend and we're so happy that the strength of the sponsorships and the audiences has allowed this to grow in such a way and the Aurora Cultural Centre really wants to be part of this.’

The following weekend, on Saturday, February 18, the AWBF welcomes the Royal Canadian Legion, a new community partner, into the fold as the Legion hosts a dance to benefit the AWBF's Youth In Music Program, as well as the Army Cadets and the Legion's own Raise the Roof Campaign to raise up to \$100,000 for a new roof.

"This is such a wonderful opportunity for the Legion," said Legionnaire Lori Hoyes, who was joined on stage at last week's launch by fellow member Rose Kirby. "About a year ago I spoke to Jamie and Greg [Smith] and asked how the Legion can get involved? We want to be there for the community, reach out and be a part of this. We're so happy they had this plan of doing a dance. We have the facilities, the big hall down stairs, and we are thrilled to be a partner with them."

For AWBF co-organizer Greg Smith, it is very important to highlight their Youth In Music Program. As such, the young musicians will be integral in keeping this month-long juggernaut going. Throughout the month, there will be pop-up performances at such venues as the Aurora Public Library, the Aurora Cultural Centre, and on the festival's grand finale weekend, at Aurora's King Richard's English Pub, Aw, Shucks! and, for the first time this year, Newmarket's Big Daddy's.

"The Aurora Winter Blues Festival is moving north to Newmarket!" said Mr. Smith of the new restaurant partner. "Our Youth In Music program is very important to us and what we do is we partner with these bars and will have a professional band that will start at 9 p.m., but every night of the festival, at 7 p.m., we will have a youth band perform. It gives them the opportunity to take the stage, work on their music, their stage presence, their confidence, work together as a band and the great thing about it is, for many of them, it is their first paid gig. That is one of our rules: no musician works for free."

For more on the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, visit www.awbf.ca.