

?Journeymen? get ready to hit the Blues Festival stage



By Brock Weir

With a full month of teaser events well underway, the two-night Aurora Winter Blues Festival itself will kick off at St. Andrew's College on Friday, February 23, with the ?Journeymen Blues? night.

The Journeymen Blues evening boasts a line-up including Steve Strongman, Michael Schatte and Jack de Keyzer.

For the Juno-winning de Keyzer, who has a long-standing relationship with the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, it is a perfect opportunity to showcase work from his new album, the aptly named ?Checkmate.?

?I just put out The Best of Jack de Keyzer, which features my music from about 1985 until 2015, so we're doing songs from that as well as my new record called Checkmate, which just came out last week,? de Keyzer told The Auroran on Friday.

Checkmate features covers of classic songs from the Chess Records catalogue, a studio which was once home to such Blues icons as Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon.

?It covers all the classic blues guys that influenced all the great rock and roll acts that followed like the Rolling Stones, The Beatles, and Jimi Hendrix,? he says.

de Keyzer says he was attracted to the Chess Records catalogue for the sheer level of influence it had not only on music contemporary to its day, but music contemporary and relevant to 2018.

Born in England, where he lived until his family came to Canada when he was 10, this was the style of music he grew up with. The first record he ever bought was Elvis Presley's Heartbreak Hotel, which had its own roots in Blues, and he was still living in England at the height of the British Invasion.

?Half the material in popular music was based strongly on the blues,? he says. ?All of that was Blues-based, and then you had Motown and Marvin Gaye, which came out of Gospel and the Blues, and you had Soul people like Wilson Pickett, and that came out of Rhythm and Blues. I started playing these songs and I was self taught when I met older kids in the neighbourhood who told me, ?That's not a Rolling Stones song ? Willie Dixon wrote it,? or Muddy Waters. I started studying that music and gravitated towards developing my own sound, influenced by the original masters like the Chess Records people.?

It took a while to develop his own sound, he said, but he says he hit his stride in the 1980s when the music industry entered the digital era. This lifted a lot of constraints in that he was able to produce and record his own records whereas before, the process was quite expensive.

?I spent \$40,000 to \$80,000 back in the 80s making records, so I would always have to have backers and they would have a strong presence in the way the music went down and how it was recorded,? he says. ?The first album where I felt I was finding my own feet was Down in the Groove; that is where I felt I had more control over my music. It's at a point now where, with Checkmate, we just recorded and put everything together.

?The only thing I didn't do, for a change, was write the songs. That was liberating in a way because when you write the songs, there is that element of whether people will like the songs, how they are going to be arranged. Here you already know these are enduring songs; you just have to put your own stamp on it.?

But there is a certain satisfaction in creating your own songs from the ground up and, for de Keyzer, inspiration comes from every angle. Sometimes the process can be as simple as coming up with a song title and the rest just flows.

?I can't do a song unless I can really, really get behind the lyrics and the meaning behind it,? he says. ?I have to live the song before

I can sing it.?

Since he first started out, de Keyzer says he has seen the market and audience for Blues grow by leaps and bounds. When he first started putting himself out there in the 1970s, there was a small audience and gigs could only be found in big city markets. Nowadays, Blues festivals continue to spring up across North America and there is an appetite for the sound in smaller markets but with larger demographics.

?The beauty of Blues and Jazz is there is a framework and within that framework you can change it around and improvise,? he says. ?The improvisational point keeps it fresh, live and immediate and I think it engages the audience too because there is a bit of a tightrope thing going on. To me, that is an important feature. I don't think I could play the kind of music where you had to play it note for note the same each night.

?In Aurora, I'll have my full band, a great collection of musicians, and is going to be fun. There is nothing like live music. It's uplifting, energizing, and it's just fun.?

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