

Soulstack gets ready to take the stage at Saturday's Blues Fest

By Brock Weir

Their individual musical influences span some thirty years.

They approach music from different directions, with different styles, and, perhaps a different drive.

But, when the band Soulstack comes together, they're united by the same goal: to deliver a visceral experience.

By their own admission, they're "over the top" and proudly so, and this Saturday they are preparing to blow the roof off Theatre Aurora on the final night of the Aurora Winter Blues Festival.

The Aurora Winter Blues Festival, a venture of Music Aurora, takes over Theatre Aurora this Friday and Saturday, March 15 and 16.

Friday night's performance, which runs from 8 - 10.30 p.m. will feature JW-Jones and the Jerome Godboo Band while Saturday night will showcase Soulstack along with the Johnny Max Band.

Soulstack, which has its roots as a cover band, now makes a concerted effort to shy away from what drummer Tom Bona describes as "the clichés." Having released their first album as a group, Big Red, in 2012, they take the concept of originality seriously.

Since 2012, they have been hailed as a "finely tuned machine burning down the highway from Detroit-influenced fuzz-tinged rootsy rock'n'roll to swampy Alabama soul," but Mr. Bona describes their approach more succinctly: "We play the shit out of our instruments."

"We have an age range of about 30 years; there are about three decades of musical influences that come into the band," says Mr. Bona. "The bass player (Darryl 'Harpo' Peterson) is a little bit older, (vocalist, guitar player) Jon Knight is a little bit younger and I'm in the middle. When we set forward to create material or play material, it is not coming from five guys who went to high school together and all listened to the same music; it is coming from a wide range of musical influences and that's what I think makes Soulstack unique, that wide-range that comes in and becomes one. Everyone contributes their own style and influences and they turn it into something it could never have been otherwise."

Mr. Bona's own influences run deep.

He was attracted to the drums from a very young age. Although his mother wanted to enroll him in piano lessons, he knew his place

was behind the drumkit. He describes his stylistic roots as being more pop than blues, particularly Joe Porcaro whose collaborations include everyone from Frank Sinatra and Rosemary Clooney to Joe Cocker and Harry Connick, Jr.

'I think what happens with a lot of bands is they play in bars and [focus on] cover tunes and a lot of bands all play the same songs,' he says. 'They will do a Tragically Hop song, or Brown Eyed Girl, and we (Soulstack) never had to talk about that because we knew we never wanted to play those songs seriously. We play music that comes from our heart and soul and it effects people differently because everyone says, 'Wow, you're so different from any other band we've seen.' That's why we don't play the clichés. We play from our own influence, which combine to make something incredibly unique because we're never trying to copy some other song or music.'

Throughout their years as a band, Soulstack has brought their unique style to venues large and small, racking up an impressive list of awards and nominations along the way.

Regardless of how big their trophy case is, Mr. Bona says that when they play smaller festivals like the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, it affords them a chance to get to know a community 'and their audiences ' a bit better.

'In the bigger towns, you just kind of show up and you don't get a sense of community by any means,' he says. 'We did about 100 theatre shows across Canada and at the end of our theatre shows, we went out to the lobby and as people filtered out, it gives [performers and audiences] the chance to share their experience. The audiences actually get the chance to tell somebody they just saw the person who may have inspired them musically, or moved them. That is what I really like about those smaller venues and events because you can really connect with the community.'

To connect to Soulstack or any of the other bands participating in this year's Aurora Winter Blues Festival, come out to Theatre Aurora this Friday and Saturday. For further information, including tickets, visit musicaurora.ca/blues-festival.