

Chasing the winter blues away? Embrace them at the Aurora Winter Blues Festival



By Brock Weir

If you're thinking about ways to chase the winter blues away, why not embrace them instead?

That is the motto of Jamie Macdonald, co-founder of the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, which is set to take place next month at Theatre Aurora, as well as a variety of locations around Town.

Now entering its fourth year, after starting more informally as a house party hosted by Mr. Macdonald and his wife, Festival co-founder Helen Gushue, the Festival continues to grow and will be fanning out in the lead-up to the February event.

In fact, you can get a head-start on the festivities now at the Aurora Cultural Centre through the exhibition, "Rooted in the Blues." Spearheaded by Mr. Macdonald as part of the Centre's Community As Curator program, it not only charts the history of the blues genre at its foundations in the United States and its subsequent spread through Canada and the rest of the world, but also the roots of the Aurora Winter Blues Fest itself.

"The exhibit focuses on the origins of the blues, but we also have a Canadian twist as well in how the origin of the blues made its way up into Canada," Mr. Macdonald explains. "We highlight some of the influential people in the blues scene in Canada and we highlight female blues artists in Canada.

"Rooted in the Blues also focuses on other genres that flourished and came out of the blues recognising R&B, soul, rock and roll, and some of the other big name artists who have their roots in the blues as well. People often think of the blues as a one-off genre, but it was one of the original genres that came out of North America that spurred other genres of music as well."

Mr. Macdonald's own love of the blues has its roots in the music of Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, two men he describes as the "godfathers of the blues." From there, Johnson and Waters' albums led him to an interest in Stevie Ray Vaughan, and east coast blues master Dutch Mason, who is at the pinnacle of the Canadian blues scene.

"He was a true road warrior and lived and breathed the blues, which came out of the soulfulness of his music," says Mr. Macdonald.

Macdonald and Gushue too live and breathe the blues and after the early incarnation of the Aurora Winter Blues Festival outgrew their home, they expanded to Theatre Aurora on Henderson Drive, which remains its primary venue to this day. Last year, however, operations expanded to the Aurora Cultural Centre with their first annual Blues Bash, a party atmosphere which not only highlighted established and up-and-coming blues musicians, but also provided an opportunity to salute the work of the two community beneficiaries of proceeds stemming from the Blues Fest - CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors) and Blue Door

Shelters.

The Blues Bash returns for a second year Thursday, February 19, at the Aurora Cultural Centre, featuring the music of the 24th Street Wailers. It signals the start of the three day festival, which runs through February 21. The lineup on February 20 is billed as 'Slide Guitar Explosion' featuring Paul Deslauriers, Steve Pinchin, Conor Gains and their bands. The ladies take over on Saturday, February 21 with 'Lady Sings the Blues,' featuring Shakura S'Aida, Angel Forrest, Angelique Francis, and the Ben Racine Band.

If February 19 - 21 is too far away for you to get your blues on, you're in luck.

You can get appetizers of what's to come at multiple venues in the lead up to the event, including this Saturday when the Blues take over the Blue Gallery at the Aurora Cultural Centre, in conjunction with the Aurora Farmers' Market, which runs until 2 p.m.

'Pop-Up Performances' are also planned throughout January and February at the Aurora Public Library and other venues around town.

'We have three local performers coming in through January and February that will do mini pop-up 15 minute performances on Saturday afternoons,' says Mr. Macdonald of the initiative that is new this year, adding onto the success of additional components introduced in 2014. 'What was really surprising and quite pleasing [last year] was the introduction of music workshops, both for the youth in our partnership with The Arts Music Store, which was very well received and exceeded our expectations. That was all freely provided to the youth of Aurora. [With this exhibition] we just want to kindle those questions about the blues, have people start following up and enquiring about our efforts, not only how they can take in the different events and activities, but how they can get involved in helping grow the festival too.'

'It is our opportunity to cross-pollinate interest in the Festival.'