

Saturday, May 19, 2012

Bluesman Deacon Jones added to Blythe River Blues Festival lineup



Bluesman Deacon Jones added to 1st Blythe River Blues Festival lineup

BLYTHE - Longtime blues organist Deacon Jones and his band have been added to the lineup of groups scheduled for the 1st Blythe River Blues Festival, to be held on May 26, Memorial Day weekend, at Quechan Park in Blythe. Jones' resume includes 18 years touring with the legendary John Lee Hooker (photo left) and seven years playing with Freddie King. Jones joins Fran Banish, 7th Sons, Bernie Pearl, the South Main Street Blues Band and Paul Winer on the festival bill.

Jones was a rock and roller in the early 1960s, when the hometown Richmond, Ind. band he was in, Baby Huey and the Babysitters, moved to Chicago and hired Elvin Bishop. According to Jones, Bishop kept trying to bring blues songs into the band but was met with resistance. One day Bishop invited Jones to a Chicago blues club and it turned out to be a day that changed his life forever.

"Elvin said, 'I want to take you down to this club' and the reason he wanted me to go was because he knew he would be the only white guy in the club so he wanted to be there with someone he knew," Jones said. "We were having a beer and I'm getting madder than hell looking at all these drunks, wondering why he brought me to watch all these drunks."

The drunks Jones was referring to turned out to be Muddy Waters, James Cotton and Otis Spann, some of the greatest blues musicians of all time.

"I had no idea I was watching a bandstand full of legends - all legends. But in 1964, they didn't know what they were - then they all became very famous."

As time went on, Jones and Baby began to have differences over money and women and he soon left the band. Jones traveled to New York, got in trouble, got out of trouble, and went back to Chicago with his tail tucked between his legs. He then learned that the Chicago-based Impressions were looking for a band so he tried out and got the gig, joining Curtis Mayfield on stage.

It was Mayfield who, back in 1969, gave Jones the moniker, "Deacon."

"He forgot my real name, Melvin Jones," Jones said. "I was wearing a tuxedo and we were opening for Diana Ross when she had first gone solo. While introducing the band, he turned to me on the organ and he said, 'we have... Deacon Jones. The audience erupted into laughter and since then they called me Deacon.'"

In 1969, the Impressions played the Fillmore West in San Francisco, where they played on a bill with Carlos Santana, Ike and Tina Turner and others. Unfortunately for Jones, when Mayfield left the band, so did the jobs.

Fortune though, shined on Jones when the brother of Freddie King called and said the group needed an organist.

"I did one set with Freddie and he looked at me and said, 'you're hired,'" Jones said. "I have three rules, King said to Jones: Be on time, don't be too high you can't play, and don't carry anything illegal in my vehicles."

After hearing the rules, King asked Jones if he drank. Not wanting to lose the job, Jones wasn't sure if he should say yes or no.

"I said occasionally and he said what's your preference?" Jones said. "By then the dressing room was beginning to fill up and I said it don't matter. He said, 'I better watch Deacon Jones when my bottle's open.'"

Jones stayed with King until his death, three days after Christmas in 1976. King, at the time, was about to record an album with songs written by Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton and Jones.

"I couldn't believe it," Jones said. "I was just getting ready to make money and then all my dreams turned to a nightmare over night. He was my friend - and even my landlord."

Jones wandered around for a couple of years and then went to club in Dallas with a friend who took him to see John Lee Hooker, who was on stage with a guitar player, bassist and drummer.

"At the end of the night I introduced myself and told him I had played with Freddie King," Jones said. "He said, 'I remember Freddie, he used to sweat when he ate.' I told him 'I'll play one song with you and if it don't sound right, you won't have to ask me to leave, I'll just go.'"

Jones ended up playing the entire set with Hooker.

"Afterward he said, 'can you travel?' I said my bags are out in the car."

Jones played with Hooker for 18 years until he had a misunderstanding with his booking agent in 1992 over t-shirt sales.

"I had a choice," Jones said. "I could have shot his agent and gone to San Quentin the rest of my life - or leave the Bay Area and move to LA."

Jones said that in 2001, John Lee Hooker's daughter called and said they wanted him to come back - but three days later he got a call and was told Hooker had died.

"I cried," Jones said. "I was his driver, his security guard, his best friend."

Jones said it's all the hard luck he's had to endure that makes him a bluesman.

"Why do you think they call it the blues?" he asked. "I have had some real funky luck. I know what it feels like to be stabbed in the back, double crossed, to be let down cause I've been through it. When I tell someone something, that's the way it is, even if it comes out of my pocket."

The band Jones is bringing to the Blythe River Blues Festival includes bass player Rick Taub, who has been with Jones since 1993, drummer Craig McMullen, who has jammed with King Solomon and Little Milton, and guitarist Lester Lands.

"He plays just like BB King," Jones said. "He's a church man, which is a good thing to be."

Barbara Ivy will be Jones' front singer.

"She brought the roof down at Universal City when she appeared with BB King," Jones said. "Not only does she have an authentic, genuine blues voice, she puts a good show."

Jones said he couldn't wait to play the 1st Blythe River Blues Festival.

"I'm a bluesman," he said. "I like festivals, the imagery and you know everyone there is there to hear the blues. You don't have to worry about someone coming up and saying, 'do you know blah, blah, blah by Led Zepplin?' We get on the stage and do our thing. We're going to come out like storm troopers."

The Blythe River Blues Festival will be held from 2 p.m. until midnight at the Quechan Marina on the Colorado River in Blythe.

Tickets are \$15 and available through the Blythe Area Chamber of Commerce (760-922-8166) or online at blytheriverblues.com. You can also watch the show from your own boat for just \$25 and the price of ticket for everyone in the boat.

Local hotels will offer discounts to customers who mention the Blythe River Blues Festival when booking a room. A list of hotels and resorts is provided at the blytheriverblues.com. There will also be RV parking at the nearby Colorado River Fairgrounds for \$10 a night.

Palo Verde Valley Transit Agency will provide bus service from a fixed route and door-to-door. The local Silver Route 5 bus will make two trips from K-Mart along Hobsonway picking up at all eastbound bus stops to Quechan Park at 12:30 p.m. and 3 p.m. for \$1.65 per person. Curb-to-Curb service is \$5 each way, locally to and from Quechan Park, and is available from 4 p.m. until midnight by calling 760-922-4900.

There will also be pick up service at McIntyre Park at 3:30 p.m., 5:30 p.m. and from Mayflower/Hidden Beaches at 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. to Quechan Park for \$5 a person, one way. There will also be pick up service every hour on the hour from 4 p.m. until 10 p.m., from the KOA campground.