



the paramount blues festival

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It would be easy to fill every installment of my regular column with music from my home state, so give a guy a pinch of credit for being judicious. But it's not every Wisconsin town of an under 11,000 population that throws a day-long blues festival.

Grafton, however, was home to Paramount Records, the label (and outgrowth of a furniture company) responsible for 78s by Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James and other figures of inestimable importance to the music's recorded history. Thus, the inaugural Paramount Blues Festival.

And if "blue" is synonymous with "feeling crappy", the weather fit the occasion. Heavy rain assailed the music and exhibition tents, much of the day, making a long stay under one of them more imperative than it otherwise might have been. Although I'd have liked to have heard the lecture by Dutch author **Alex van der Tuuk**, responsible for the book Paramount's Rise and Fall (and my hooded slicker would have protected me sufficiently during the short jaunt from one tent to another), I stayed put where the tunes were.

A slightly late start on the road, and my search for the fest's locale, Lime Kiln Park, prevented me from seeing most of the hour-long set by University of Memphis professor/Blues Revue contributing editor Dr. David Evans and Joe Filisko. I *did* catch all of their final song, however—a Skip James piece Evans introduced by relating how James' music was deemed, by some, to be so sad that he was occasionally paid to *not* sing. Nice work if you can get it, and Evans' and Filisko's interpretation went deep enough into James' mournfulness to be plenty palpable.

Festival master of ceremonies and Iowa Blues Hall Of Fame inductee, Michael "Hawkeye" Herman, followed with more acoustic blues on guitar and a 1942 National dobro. Blessed with a warmly inviting, yet richly emotive voice, Herman knows just how fun it is to relieve worldly woes by blues singing. This he did with some originals as well as Robert Johnson and Bessie Smith oldies. Between numbers, and interpolated into them, Herman told—among other personal and historical tidbits—of his touring of schools to educate youngsters on the blues and his time living in Oakland, where he would help Brownie McGhee carry his groceries, just to get into the bluesman's house.

The Special Guest Performance listed in the program came from the hands and larynx of David "Honeyboy" Edwards. Although he was a contemporary of Paramount's 1929-32 lifespan,

he never recorded for the label. His gruff'n'mumbly singing and ferocious strumming/plucking of his amped-up red folk guitar, however, not only recalled Paramount's fecund era, but, likewise, proved—more than any White Stripes or Black Keys record ever could—that blues can be punk as it wants to be. Occasional harmonica accompaniment by Earwig Records founder, **Michael Frank**, weaved around Edwards' voice and string work in what was, sometimes, chaotically beautiful as the freest of avant-garde jazz. Edwards shared stories, too—the richest of which was his drunken confrontation with Peacock Records honcho Don Robey.

A man who *did* record for Paramount, **Henry Townsend**, was supposed to have followed Edwards for a double whammy of nonagenarian blues survivors. Alas, Townsend made it to Grafton, was game to perform, but fell too ill to make it to the stage. His son came up for an apology and local (as in the Milwaukee 'burb of Shorewood) guitarist/harmonica player/singer Steve Cohen and another fellow (half of whose name escapes me...Peter someone-or-another...) borrowed Herman's instruments for a short set of country blues. Highlights were McGhee and Robert Johnson homages and my day's first sing-along, "Ride and Roll".

After a short speech by Wisconsin First Lady Jessica Doyle invoking civic and historical pride for the city (and probably hoping to drum up some votes for her other half, Jim, come November), Townsend's absence—sadly followed by his death, not long thereafter—left more time for **Cohen's Blues? Band** (sic), featuring Milwaukee's Fender-sponsored axe hero Greg Koch, to proffer the day's first dose of fully electrified, rock-inflused blues. Although they displayed astute taste by covering Delbert McClinton, T-Bone Burnett, Taj Mahal, Ry Cooder, Stevie Ray Vaughn, and current blues chart-topper James Hunter, amid their instrumental and vocal originals, this popcrit wasn't quite feeling the quintet's generally laconic take on post-hippie rock-bluesmanship, Koch's technical finesse notwithstanding. Laudably, and probably testifying to the kind of blues that gets crowds moving in this neck of the proverbial woods, the Blues?'sters were the first act, here, to get some of the overwhelmingly Euromerican audience dancing near the lip of the stage. 'Yay' for all involved, save partypoopers such as yours truly who were wishing that when Cohen sang of "some crazy mama", he would actually *convey* some kind of, y'know, *mania*, instead of the over-comfort of a guy at home in the roots music of his choosing, and without adding discernable urgency to the tradition in which he's steeped. With respect to his obvious talent and status as a historian (my editor in Milwaukee informed me that Cohen was one of the original hipsters in his vicinity who deeply researched the music he fell for), let me just say that Cohen came off better in an acoustic setting, that day.

Conversely, the energy didn't let up for a second with Milwaukeeans Rev. Raven & the Chain Smokin' Altar Boys. Matching that transgressively fun moniker was a tightness and more focused danceability that their immediate predecessors lacked. Snappy suit jackets, slicked-back hair, and a barely constrained horniness—as expressed in songs about metaphorical bees and actual women—abetted their party hearty agenda. Bonus points for their playing something by the first electric blues dude I got even *close* to being seriously into, Hound Dog Taylor (perhaps because I could hear Taylor's unwitting punk rock parallelism).

From the Rev' and his 'Boys, the scene shifted south to Chicago, whence came Nora Jean Bruso. She has the commendation of no less an antecedent than Koko Taylor, and fittingly so.

From nigh spilling out of her sequined dress to her air of careening rambunctiousness, Brusco embodies the good/bad girl demeanor and aesthetic which Taylor has exemplified for decades. To her contradictory credit, Brusco could sing of how she makes love to crocodiles (and flouts anti-bestiality statutes?) in her makeover of a Bo Diddley classic, "I'm A Woman", and mention, between songs, that her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ assured her that Grafton's blues celebration would grow to be a monumental annual event—enabling her to come off as an "aw, shucks" sweetheart. Albeit one with a gargantuan libido. Between her takes on Taylor, Diddley, John Lee Hooker, et al, her originals often derived from autobiographical detail, such as her grandma's rural tavern in the too darn catchy "Miss May's Juke Joint".

With some regret, and over an hour's drive ahead of me, I departed before the conclusion of Brusco's fiery set and the onset of festival topper Albert Cummings. If only because it may be a revelation to hear a bluesy singer/electric guitarist who was also described as "an award-winning builder of custom homes", I hope to hear Cummings, soon.

The Grafton Blues Association has plenty on which to pride itself, with this inaugural event. Next year, if I don't have to work the sound booth at my church, the day after, maybe I can, at least, stay for the fireworks.

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