

Bowness Bay Blues 2014

After an enjoyable acoustic set from Buzz Elliott at the Lake District Boat Club, West Cumbrian band Off the Hook got the festival off to a rousing start at the Soldiers and Sailors Club. There was an energetic performance from vocalist/blues harp player Neil McClure, some sublime guitar solos from Paul Barnes and a great rhythm section in the shape of drummer Allan Hall and bassist Ian Rowell. Keyboard player Michael Sparks also played well but was perhaps a little too low in the mix.

Then it was on to the Hydro Hotel for the inimitable Blue Swamp, featuring Mike Bowden, John Williamson and Big Vern. They treated us to a selection of blues and country-tinged numbers, enhanced by stunning slide guitar from John and interspersed with Mike's deadpan humorous anecdotes. Midnight Train followed, with their trademark mixture of blues, soul and funk, featuring accomplished singer Debbie Giles and top-notch drummer Sam Kelly. The Hydro was busy and the first night of the festival ended on a very good note.

Saturday opened with the Tommy Allen/Johnny Hewitt Blues Duo at The Quayside, serving up superb versions of numbers by Howlin' Wolf and Robert Johnson among others. Johnny's harmonica playing is really exceptional – and his rough-edged blues vocals are perfectly matched by Tommy's sweetly sensitive singing and guitar playing. Their set was sheer pleasure from start to finish. Meanwhile Dan Burnett was entertaining people at the Burn How Hotel. Dan was a great success at Bowness Bay Blues 2013 – and returned to the festival by special request.

The afternoon brought several acts, including AWOL, a young and very long-haired blues rock trio from Maryport, who definitely got the prize for 'most rock and roll band of the festival'! Despite claiming not to know any blues, they belted out some very creditable Hendrix and SRV numbers in the basement bar at Ruskins. Meanwhile, over at the Hydro, Birmingham band The Brothers Groove were playing a classy, funky set – initially to a rather small audience, though the room gradually filled up, and those who came liked what they heard, and stayed for more. Highlights of this gig included some excellent guitar work and a brilliant slap bass solo.

Back at the Lake District Boat Club, people were crowding in to see the other Midlands act on the bill, Slowburner. They are a powerhouse band and their vocalist, Paul Bridgwater, really does have the moves and the voice to justify comparison with Robert Plant. He is very ably supported by guitarist Mike Bannister, bassist Rob Newell and multi-talented young drummer Dave Small – last seen playing his own material at the Friday afternoon jam session and showing that he is no mean guitarist and singer himself.

In the early evening, Tin Pan Alley, another popular act from last year's festival, were playing at Ruskins. And up at The Wheelhouse, The Bullfrogs (fronted by Buzz Elliott) were warming up the audience for the headliners. Their renditions of familiar favourites by Pink Floyd, The Eagles, Neil Young and others went

down extremely well with an audience who clearly welcomed a bit of seventies rock along with their blues.

Finally it was time for Saturday's main event. It was standing room only when Sean Webster and his band took to the stage. Sean's passionate, raspy vocals gave every song real urgency and emotional impact, supported by Ash Wilson's dazzling guitar and his brother Phil Wilson's enthusiastic drumming. When it came to Sean's jaw-dropping version of the Etta James' classic 'I'd Rather Go Blind', most of the audience listened intently, as he breathed new, poignant, life into a very old song. Finishing with some well-chosen upbeat numbers, this gig ended with a very crowded dance floor and a venue full of exhausted, happy blues fans.

Sunday brought an opportunity to hear the hotly tipped Alex McKown Band, fronted by a very gifted guitarist who is still only 17. You could have heard the proverbial pin drop during Alex's rendition of 'Texas Flood' and there were some scintillating solos from Simon Peat on saxophone. Over at The Stag's Head, The Swaps provided a very different but equally pleasurable take on the blues. Beth Brooks has a rich, deep, soulful voice that puts you in mind of old-style Negro spirituals. They did a great version of 'Put a Spell on You' and their set was enlivened by Tomo Sugisaka's harmonica playing.

Some of the Sunday afternoon gigs may have ended up with rather smaller audiences as people realised they needed to get to The Wheelhouse in good time for the mighty Marcus Bonfanti's headlining gig. And Marcus did not disappoint! Mr Bonfanti is a consummate showman, who held the audience spellbound with a set that ranged from his back catalogue, with early songs like 'Devil Girl' to raunchy tracks from his latest CD including 'Cheap Whiskey'. His encore was one of those moments you felt privileged to witness – a solo acoustic version of 'Bleecker Street', played for the very first time by special request. There was a well-deserved standing ovation at the end of the show.

For those who still wanted more, the perfect end to the festival lay in store at the Hole in t'Wall. There, Tommy Allen and Johnny Hewitt were quite literally rocking the joint with their 1950s Chicago blues. They played their hearts out and got more or less everyone in the pub up on their feet dancing. What a gig!

Still only in its third year, Bowness Bay Blues has definitely come of age and can now lay claim to a regular place on any blues fan's calendar. Musicians and punters alike clearly appreciate the beautiful backdrop of Lake Windermere, and the friendly welcome offered by music venues, hotels and restaurants in Bowness.

Excellent ticket sales, sponsorship and generous donations from festivalgoers ensured that over £6000 was raised for this year's chosen charitable cause – Automated External Defibrillators for the Windermere First Responders Team – and other charities supported by the Rotary Club of Windermere. The Rotary Club, who organise Bowness Bay Blues, can be rightly proud of their efforts, and it is to be hoped that the festival will be an annual event, on the weekend before Easter, for the foreseeable future. [ENDS]