

Time to party at the Big Easy with Orangeville's Blues and Jazz

By Constance Scrafield

The timing is great: Feb. 17, there'll be an opportunity to blow away the February blues.

You can party yourself silly at the Big Easy Blues Bash, a New Orleans Mardi Gras-style celebration at the Best Western Plus Orangeville Inn and Suites on Buena Vista Drive. The biggest fundraiser of the year for June's Orangeville Blues and Jazz Festival, this promises to be the most fun event of the New Year ? with the Festival itself to follow months later, of course.

?It's new this year that we have a theme,? Larry Kurtz, founder of the Festival and its artistic director, said. ?We thought we'd just change it up a bit for something different and fun. We've done the same format and wanted to step it up with the Mardi-Gras. People are encouraged to dress up for it, but it's not mandatory. Some people get right into it.?

?In keeping with the party atmosphere of this year's Big Easy format, we are thrilled to be featuring the exciting Juno Award nominee Maple Blues, award winner and previous Festival headliner Blackburn, along with the R and B sounds of Orangeville's favourites, Soul Collective,? he said. ?This is going to be an evening of high energy music and dancing, along with the party atmosphere of the Big Easy.?

Coming from Toronto to headline the evening, Blackburn is a band of four brothers, a family of musicians. The four Blackburn brothers have played together all their lives, really. Their father is Bobby Dean Blackburn, an R and B artist, a legend in the Toronto music scene for more than 30 years.

Actually, their known family history goes to the 1830s, when their great-great-grandfather escaped the south, as a slave, to travel to the north, to Boston, where he met a Canadian lady with whom he travelled to Owen Sound, then the most northern retreat for the Underground Railway. The Blackburn brothers are the direct descendants, with a proud link to that time in Canadian history.

They say that they came together as a band organically, more as a result of living the music. With their father so deeply engaged in the business, they learned to play and love the music. Although they each have an education outside of music, forming a band was ?just a natural process.?

The ?process? has paid off too, for they received a Maple Blues Award for Best New Band of the Year in 2010 and a Juno nomination for Best Blues Album of the Year in 2016.

The eldest of the brothers writes a lot of the songs they do and Kurtz was amused to say ?I was in kindergarten with him.?

Canadian jazz and blues bands are world-class in any event, as Kurtz said.

?As Artistic Director of the Blues and Jazz Festival, I am still in charge of choosing all the bands,? he said. ?I went to Memphis for three weeks and there were 250 bands from around the world ? Europe, Australia, Canada and all over the U.S.?

?In Memphis, the Canadian talent was world-class. If I have a band apply to me (to come to the Blues and Jazz Festival), I usually do better at negotiating,? he added. ?Over the weekend (of the festival in June), we might have bands from the U.S. or Europe, but we mostly like to get Canadian musicians.?

They fill the Main Stage beside the Town Hall and in the Opera House in Orangeville, as well as covered stages, up and down Broadway and Mill Street. During the festival weekend, bands play also in many restaurants throughout Orangeville and the immediate area independently. It is an amazing weekend that brings thousands of people to town and gives the whole place a shot in the arm to get the summer started.

The Big Easy, which is the familiar, pet name for New Orleans, is the largest fundraiser of the year to support the Festival and, this year, does not have a sponsor. It does, however, have a wonderful silent auction.

Kurtz was really happy about that too.

?The level of support is really high for this,? he reported. ?It was not a hard ask; people are offering ? actually stopping me on the street to give me something for it.?

Event Chair and Board member Michelle Wilson is excited to be preparing the venue for the party.

?I'm in charge of all aspects of this event,? she was pleased to say. ?We have to see that everything gets done. The biggest thing is the decor. It looks like a party with plenty colour and beads ? there's a New Orleans-themed menu, cajun food ? I've always been intrigued with New Orleans and the whole Mardi-Gras idea. We decided that I would oversee this one, as it is the first time for a theme like this.?

?The volunteers have been amazing,? she enthused. ?It's all about having fun. New Orleans is a party and we want people to enjoy themselves and try some New Orleans-style food.?

?It's a chance to get dressed up if you want to ? bring out your bling and come and have a great time,? she added with a smile.

Doors open at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are at BookLore and any TD branch in Orangeville for \$50, or \$55 at the door. VIP tables of 10 can

be arranged at prossobjf@gmail.com