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John Lee Sanders combines blues, jazz and funk

By Chris Stanford
Friday, February 27, 2009

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"Can we do this in the afternoon," said John Lee Sanders in a deep southern drawl when I call to set up an interview. "I'm not really much of a morning person." Spoken like a true bluesman, which he is.

When I do sit down to talk with him it's well after the noon hour. Dressed in a long wool overcoat, with a brimmed hat of indeterminate vintage covering his long curly hair, he also looks the part of the consummate musician, which he is.

Heavy with the syncopated rhythms of New Orleans and the deep south, Sanders' music draws on influences as diverse as the Neville Brothers, boogie woogie piano, funk, jazz, and the traditions of rootsy R&B and soul. Channelling it all through a blues filter, he conjures up an appealing musical stew, whether playing piano, sax, guitar, or caressing a lyric with his expressive vocal style.

"A lot of people have a preconceived idea of a blues band," he said, "I call what I do blues/jazz/funk, but you can only have so many hyphens."

A nominee for the 2008 Western Canada Music Award for outstanding blues recording for his most recent release, Bucket Full of Blues, Sanders plays the Rotary Centre for the Arts in Kelowna on Saturday. His seventh release, Bucket Full of Blues is an honest-to-goodness celebration of deep, soulful music from a master. If you're not moved by it one way or another, maybe you better check for a pulse.

Recorded in Austria – where Sanders incidentally will play festivals for 10 days this July – the CD features his talented European band, who translate his Southern-fried funk with aplomb and more than a little heart.

Born in 1951 in Evansville, Indiana, Sanders moved with his family to Mississippi at the age of two, to the heart of blues country near the area known as the Delta. Bordered to the north by Memphis, to the south by Vicksburg, Miss. and lying between the Mississippi River to the west and the Yazoo River on the east, the fertile rural farmland of the Delta spawned one of the earliest styles of blues and the sounds the young John Lee heard there changed his life.

"Mississippi was pretty rural," he said. "It was about 60 per cent black where I was. I first heard the blues and gospel on the radio and I remember this spiritual feeling just coming out of those work songs and spirituals." Gospel music wasn't just something heard on the radio for Sanders – he lived it.

"I sang in the church choir my whole life," he said. "That's where I learned harmony and vocalization."

With music in the family – it was inevitable that Sanders picked up the urge to play an instrument.

"Around age six, I just started experimenting with notes. My grandma, aunt and older brother played piano and started showing me some boogie woogie," he said. "Then my brother brought home an early Ray Charles record."

Sanders musical education had begun in earnest.

Sanders family soon moved to the bigger centre of Memphis, where he met a certain musician, who, like himself, would bridge the gap between the black 'race' music and the white world.

"I met Elvis Presley when he was starting out on Sun Records. He bought a house a few doors down from my relatives," he said.

It was also around that time the young John Lee made his first trip to New Orleans.

"I saw the Preservation Hall Jazz Band when I was seven or eight," he recalled. "It was wild. As a kid we didn't know a whole lot about jazz, but hearing it live it felt really happy, it seemed really fun."

The family moved to Birmingham, Ala. in 1960, just as the civil rights movement was gaining momentum.

"That was kind of a weird time," said Sanders. "The whole race thing was awful, separate bathrooms and all that stuff."

It was during his time in Birmingham that music became a viable pursuit for Sanders and he jumped at the chance.

"I started doing gigs with my older brothers' band when I was about 12," he said. "I was billed as 'like Little Stevie Wonder. I sang in front of 2,000 people and we would pack the places.'"

He relocated to northern Louisiana in 1968.

"We could get the music (from New Orleans) on the radio," he said. "It had a carefree feeling to it. New Orleans was such a melting pot and it was the only place where blacks could play their drum music in public and carry on their rhythmic traditions.

"I was too young to get into the clubs, but I used to go to the back door and listen to a band called The Boogie Kings . . . man they were tight."

In time, Sanders not only was able to legally get into the bars and clubs, but continued his ad hoc musical education and playing them regularly, although not without some risk to life and limb.

"We were at one club back in the sticks," he said, "when all of a sudden everyone in there hit the floor.

"Well, it turns out these two guys had guns and they were fighting over a woman, of course. They went outside and we got out of there."

Eventually Sanders moved on to the safer confines of North Texas State University, where he received a scholarship and earned a degree in composition. A move to California resulted in stay of 29 years, where Sanders developed a career as a session vocalist and musician, and became a proficient arranger and producer. He worked in television and movies and performed with the likes of Willie Nelson, John Lee Hooker, Chuck Berry and Tower of Power.

Sanders song Foreclose on the House of Love, covered by Marcia Ball, received a Grammy nomination in 2004.

Sixteen years spent as the musical director for now-deceased blues legend Long John Baldry led to Sanders meeting his soon-to-be wife Judy at a Baldry concert at Kelowna's Flashbacks nightclub. After a brief time in Vancouver, Sanders now calls the Okanagan home.

Sanders debuted at the Salmon Arm Roots and Blues festival in Salmon Arm last year, playing to 24,000 people. He will also headline at the Back to the Blues festival in Chilliwack in late July and the Kaslo Jazz Festival Aug. 2.



John Lee Sanders

eVent Night Out

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He will play the Mary Irwin Theatre with backing from the six-piece World Blues Band, featuring Scott Grant on drums, Dean Singh on bass, Tony Robertson on guitar, Vince Mai on trumpet and Bill Runge on tenor saxophone.

According to Sanders he may also bring out some 'surprise' guests in the person of three students from George Elliot secondary school in Winfield on trumpet, trombone and tuba for a finale to the show.

"We'll see if we can get that together in time," he said.

Just as he learned music from so many others, Sanders is also eager to give back. To that end, he will host several brass band workshops at George Elliot and Okanagan Mission secondary schools, passing along his knowledge of jazz and the New Orleans sound.

With a peripatetic musical career spanning several different countries and continents, the blues is still the common thread that runs through his music though, and Sanders is philosophical when talking about its' timeless appeal. "Even though blues can be as sad as it can be, there's always some resolution that comes out of it," he said.

"People are trying to get some strength out of it . . . I believe that's what it is."

Most of Sanders music is available on iTunes.

Who: John Lee Sanders and the World Blue Band, pre-show featuring Jambalaya

Where: The Rotary Centre for the Arts, Kelowna

When: Saturday, Feb. 28, show starts 8 p.m., pre-show at 7 p.m.

Tickets: \$30 adults or \$10 students. Available at the RCA box office (250) 717-5304 or online at ticketmaster.ca.

Info: johnleesanders.com

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