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From the Delta to Kelowna

By Portia Priegert
Friday, April 4, 2008

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The Okanagan is a long way from the smoky blues bars of the Deep South, but John Lee Sanders is bridging that gap by bringing the rich rhythms of his roots in the Mississippi Delta to his new home in Kelowna.

Chatting with Sanders, a vocalist, keyboardist and sax player, is like taking a ride through musical history. He has played with the likes of Chuck Berry and Stevie Wonder and brushed shoulders with other stars during his long career.

But love – in the form of his wife, Judy – brought him north to Canada two years ago.

"In 1998, while on tour with Long John Baldry, I met a girl from Kelowna, and things clicked," says Sanders. "We spent the next eight years in a cross-border relationship that ended up in Vancouver and, now, Kelowna."

"I've been in Canada since 2006, for 18 months in Vancouver, and just bought a house in September in Kelowna," he says. "I received my permanent residence card a few weeks ago and was not able to perform until it was processed."

Sanders has gigs April 18 and April 19 at the Blue Gator and May 3 at the Minstrel Café. He will also headline July 12 at Roots, Rhythm and Blues, a free weekend concert organized by Parks Alive

Sanders, 56, has a complex biography, but highlights include his song, Foreclosure on the House of Love, reaching Number Nine on the blues charts in 2004. In 2007, he received an Emmy nomination for the jazz ballad, Just One Kiss, from the long-running soap opera, The Bold and the Beautiful.

Blues biographer David Ritz has described Sanders' sound as full-bodied and blood-washed.

"He reminds us that blues are concerned with neither nostalgia nor self-pity," Ritz writes. "John Lee Sanders' blues are about ... a renewal of strength, a resurrection of the human spirit, a projection of hard-earned hope and a declaration of extravagant love."

Sanders grew up in a musical family and was immersed in jazz, blues and gospel at a pivotal time in American history, particularly in the South. As a boy, out shopping with his mother, he remembers shaking hands with civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Looking back, it was such a thrill to meet him," says Sanders. "He wasn't getting such good press at the time, where I was from, but now he's such a huge American hero and we recognize what he did."

He also met Elvis Presley when the King bought his first house a few doors down from his aunt and uncle in Memphis. The neighbourhood kids would hang around waiting for Presley to drive up in his Cadillac with a bevy of female fans. Once, Presley's dad let Sanders use the washroom in the house and showed him Presley's guitars.

"I still remember his bedroom. It was almost like a kid's bedroom. There were twin beds, with cowboy wallpaper on the walls."

By the time Sanders was 12, he was opening for R&B bands that passed through town.

Sanders, who counts Cajun, Zydeco, New Orleans funk and gospel among his musical influences, moved to California in 1977. He became a session player and producer, working on recordings by John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Witherspoon, Freddie King, Dr. John, The Meters, Jimmy Page and others.

In the 1990s, he toured with Starship, Roy Rogers & the Delta Rhythm Kings, Paul Williams, Sam Moore and Baldry. Lately, while waiting for his immigration papers, Sanders has been writing film scores and music for television from his home studio. Last year, he released his first live DVD – Live at Rock Beach – with a soundtrack that includes classic blues, New Orleans funk and gospel music.

Check out Sanders' sound at <http://johnleesanders.com>.

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