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A rollin' good time for all

by diane vance/and cindy iutzi/gate city staff writerS

Blues music rolled and sometimes rocked throughout Victory Park in Keokuk this weekend.

Activities under the tent began Friday evening and Saturday afternoon with a variety of entertainment, food and drink.

Dave Loeb sack, Democratic candidate for U.S. Congress, greeted and talked with concert-goers in Saturday afternoon.

Under cloudy skies but no rain, the Saturday evening stage bands kicked-off with the first-place winning band in the Kansas City Blues Challenge in 2005 and 2005, Ron Teamer and Smokin' Guns.

Pati Mason of Keokuk and friend Janet Thompson of Des Moines sat close to the stage Friday and Saturday. This wasn't their first Rollin' on the River.

"I like blues music," said Mason. "The crowd here is friendly."

Thompson, a Central Iowa Blues Society member, was excited to see the next band, Juke Joint Sinners, a five-piece band comprised of members who have played in other bands. Members are from the Quad Cities area. The band won the Des Moines Blues challenge.

"I go to the Mississippi Valley Blues Fest once in awhile," said Thompson. "There's so many people there. You can't sit near the stage. Keokuk's festival is smaller, more intimate. I like attending blues concerts because the audience is more grown-up and very friendly."

The five-piece band, dressed in black, got audience members up and dancing.

After Watermelon Slim & the Workers' first song, the lanky, cowboy-looking old guy (Bill Homans) playing slide guitar declared, "We're out of the terminal and down the road."

He peppered the set with talk of his days driving a forklift and truck, dedicating the second song, "Wheel Man," to "all you retired criminals out there."

"I love Iowa," he said between harmonica riffs and slide guitar. "Iowa is on my short list of places to retire, if I ever retire."

He got crowd participation by asking audience members to echo back a chorus of "Hey, bo-diddly," in one song. Several people also were up and dancing.

One song, "The Ashtray is Full," is about long-term relationships that drift away, he said. As a truck driver, when he'd come home from a road trip, his house was clean and tidy until his relationship fell apart and his love moved out. All his cigarette butts he'd left before hitting the road remained on his return.

"I love the blues," he said. "You all are my friends in this. It's up close and personal with the blues. There's no you

and me - it's us."

In 2003 Watermelon Slim recorded a CD, "Up Close & Personal."

He talked about finding his blues name in 1984.

"I left Massachusetts and bummed around Texas for awhile," he said. "I landed in Oklahoma. Someone showed me how to grow a garden. Watermelons grow well in the 104-105 degrees summer and sandy soil. I grew watermelon.

"I was standing in my garden on one of those hot, hot days, with a D harmonica in one hand and a slice of red, juicy watermelon in the other. Like Paul on the Damascus Road I had one of those flashes. I heard me a blues name. I put down the harmonica and played the watermelon.

"You don't believe me you can play a watermelon?" he asked the crowd. "Go out on a still night and listen to the watermelon grow. You can hear those little curly-q things playing music."

He left the stage saying, "This makes me feel so good makes me want to do it all over again."

The Kinsey Report from Indiana headlined and closed the show. The crowd reacted with appreciation and dancing.

Even before the stage acts began Friday, everyone knew the 18th annual Rollin' on the River Blues Fest would be something special this year.

"It was fantastic," according to Rollin' committee member Leland Robertson Monday. "It was really good. We had a great turnout this year. With the variety of music there was something that everybody liked.

"The weather happened to hold up for us, ticket sales were up, everything went smoothly all year long. As far as things look this year, we should be back for 19 next year.

"I talked to a couple of bands and they really like to play our festival. Popa Chubby flew in from New York and Watermelon Slim flew in from New York, and they both had to leave right after for big gigs. Popa Chubby had a performance at 3 p.m. Saturday in Wisconsin and Watermelon Slim had to fly back to New York to play."

Joe Price, a Waterloo native in the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame, won the crowd's soul first thing on Friday with a one man show embodying the blues greats who helped build his music.

"He's got that Alabama blues, that's what I like about him," said Percy Whitt, Keokuk. "The down home blues. I grew up on it. He's got Lead Belly and Howlin' Wolf in him."

When Price took his guitar into a foot stomping, hard driving song, Whitt said, "I remember dancing to music like this back in Alabama with my little sister. We called it Rockola back in the day."

Passing trains occasionally accompanied Price, with a steel on steel beat and whistles almost on cue. He didn't miss a beat, but his smile, already so big it cracked his face, grew wider, and his eyes were full of a wild joy as he acknowledged the rightness of the moment.

During the song, "Designated Driver," he stomped time with both boots on a metal mat, and sweat dripped off the bill of his cap while he captured each note and wrung it dry.

The crowd stood for Price, clapped him into another tune, and showed its appreciation when he ramped up the performance a notch nobody knew existed.

Stage acts William Elliott Whitmore and Dr. X and Slink Rand kept the momentum rolling and added their own direction - Whitmore blended the blues with folk, slowing down the beat but kicking up the emotional intensity.

Whitmore's voice blended the earthy depth of songwriter, poet, singer Leonard Cohen with the rasp and world knowledge of great blues singers. His songs contain a full measure of his life experience so far, leaving the future wide open and his talent ready to range in a genre with little or no boundaries.

Dr. X picked up the speed, energizing the crowd as dusk segued into night. A steady stream of people moved in, set up chairs, spread blankets and watched the show, drawn by Keith "Slink" Rand, Carthage, III., on guitar. Rand commanded standing attention with the "National Anthem" a la Jimmi Hendrix, and kept the excitement level high for the headline act.

Popa Chubby moved onto the stage quietly, professionally, picked up his well-worn 1965 Fender Strat guitar and tore the house down with an understated, explosive performance.

He led off with the "American Blues," and from that moment on held the crowd in his guitar picking hands. Popa Chubby kept his guitar hot, cool, wailing, cruising for the rest of the night, moving into the bloodstream of everyone within listening distance. The crowd was so plugged in, trains were a distant memory, barges powered by almost unnoticed and a dark, starry night ringed by flashes of far-away lightning could have been a concert hall.

"Do you feel the blues?" he yelled

"Yeah," the audience yelled back.

In one whiplash moment Popa Chubby went from a deep blues song into "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life," a Carter family song that led Jim Wells, Rollin' on the River Committee member, to say, "Can you believe that?"

Wells was pleased with the size of the crowd and the performances Friday.

"We're absolutely delighted with the support the community is giving this Friday night billing," Wells said. "And the weather cooperated beautifully. It's a very good Friday crowd."