

Cleary shows keyboard finesse

Crack rhythm section pumps irresistible grooves

Roger Levesque, Special to The Journal

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There's nothing like a little effervescent southern-style percolation to finish off a varied, day-long musical menu. So it was when English-born, New Orleans-transplanted keyboard master John Cleary and his Absolute Monster Gentlemen took a sold-out crowd of 3,000-plus through their paces at the Labatt Blues Festival Saturday.

Cleary was an engaging singer to the extent he needed to be, but his finesse with a couple of electronic keyboards at stagefront was simply fabulous, featuring a strong left-hand that made the most of those boogie-woogie bent grooves, a penchant for right-hand melodies that took off tinkling up the keyboard in wonderful, unexpected ways, and edgy elements of jazz, classical and rock 'n' roll thrown in for good measure.

After three quick opening numbers, *Going Home To New Orleans*, *So Damn Good* and *Second Line*, there was room for a brief ballad tempo, too, but after a few reflective moments Cleary's fingers suddenly sneaked into soaring, speedy lines and the crack rhythm section of guitarist Big D. Perkins, bassist Cornell Williams and drummer Eddie Christmas were back pumping those irresistible grooves.

Cleary's crew brought a funky close to a day of acts originating from across the



CREDIT: Chris Schwarz, The Journal
 Jon Cleary Brought a Funky Close to Saturday Night's Blues Fest Performances.



CREDIT: Chris Schwarz, The Journal
 Watermelon Slim made a fashion splash.

United States and beyond, most of them relative unknowns making their Edmonton debuts, new faces who won some rousing audience feedback. And while the weatherman had predicted rain, the sell-out crowd was lucky enough only to feel a few intermittent sprinkles before the sky cleared up at sundown.

Either way, the music managed to keep things warm starting with Australian guitarist-singer Fiona Boyes, who cranked up the energy mid-afternoon with her spare trio The Fortune Tellers. After putting in a series of original numbers and showing off her finesse on the strings, she addressed a couple of heroes.

"They say you should never try to imitate Howlin' Wolf's voice or Hubert Sumlin's guitar," Boyes noted, and then proceeded to do her best attempt of both on a killer version of Smokestack Lightning. OK, her vocal cords are a few octaves shy of Wolf's, but she sure managed to find a magnificent bellow, and if her guitar didn't quite muster Sumlin's nuances she didn't show any lack of serious chops as she threatened to break the neck of that guitar.

True to his nickname, Oklahoma-based Watermelon Slim made a fashion splash even before the tunes started, decked out as he was in a luxurious pale-green three-piece suit and matching hat. In the end, Slim's set slowed things down a bit with several sections of prolonged patter, though you can't deny the man brought a certain depth of character, and some choice musical highlights.

The crowd loved Slim, too, especially when he let out with the war whoop, "Canada rocks!" to show his pleasure with the situation. And he drew another measure of respect when -- as a war veteran himself -- he asked everyone to remove their hats for a brief but beautiful solo harmonica rendition of Taps in honour of Canada's 70-plus victims of the Afghanistan mission.

His trio The Workers provided an excellent backup as Slim alternated between his brash vocal delivery, wailing harmonica and lap-style guitar work that found oscillating, squirming, squealing tones when it wasn't roaring with the force of a Mac truck. He even used a salt shaker for a slide on several numbers including an incendiary tune called The Devil's Cadillac, before inviting Boyes back out to sit in and supply some tasty guitar solos on a couple of numbers including one tribute to his early mentor George Mayweather.

Nick Moss brought the energy level back to full speed with a set of heavy Chicago-style guitar and lots of it when he wasn't letting his three versatile sidemen The Flip Tops trade off and even double up on guitars, bass, mandolin, drums and keyboards. It was that thick but simple Chicago molasses that packed the dance floor one more time, and sent the guitar nuts reeling with satisfaction.

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