

Sunday Afternoon

The biggest surprise of the festival took place at the start of the final session. Unbilled and largely unknown, Marcus Bonfanti took the place by storm – without any warning. He was one of the guitarists who had supported Earl Thomas on the previous evening, but his relatively subdued role in the band had given no hint of his true potential. His powerful bass-baritone vocals and his dextrous acoustic guitar playing, wrapped in wonderfully off-beat and self-deprecating banter, was a revelation. Combining songs from his brilliant debut album, *Hard Times*, with a selection of songs from his forthcoming second release, the extent of his impact was confirmed by the subsequent, extensive queue at the CD counter.

Next up were the recently reformed Producers, fronted by the hugely talented Harry Skinner on guitar and vocals and completed by founder member of the band, Dave Saunders, on bass guitar, and the newly recruited Ray Drury on organ and piano and Biff Smith on drums. They delivered a great set that comprised new songs and old favourites, and the reaction of the crowd made it very clear that their return to the UK blues scene is very warmly welcomed. Harry Skinner is undoubtedly one of the class acts of British blues.

The final surprise package came in the form of the Washington, DC-based trio, Tom Principato's Powerhouse, on their first visit to the UK. Despite their Eastern states location, their music is predominantly New Orleans-oriented with a strong funky flavouring. Tom Principato is a tremendous guitarist, with the legendary Roy Buchanan as one of his influences. He switched between Strat and Telecaster to provide a stunning set with 'Too Damn Funky' off his latest album, *Raising The Roof!*, particularly well-received.

The marvellous event was brought to its climax by festival-favourite Ian Siegal, who began with a splendid solo set on steel and acoustic guitars, including his popular rendition of Gallo Del Cielo. He was then joined on stage by bass player, Andy Graham, and drummer, Nicolaj Bjerre, to perform a substantial selection of songs from their excellent, latest album, *Broadside*. It was a wonderful end to a marvellous weekend, which left everyone fully contented and already looking forward to next year.

No praise can be too high for organiser, Nick Westgarth, and his tireless team. The quality of music and the organisation of events were top class and the atmosphere relaxed and friendly. The Carlisle Blues Festival is among the very best in the country and long may it continue.

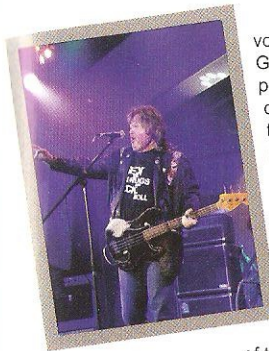
Lionel Ross

SKEGNESS ROCK'N'BLUES FESTIVAL

@ Butlins, Skegness

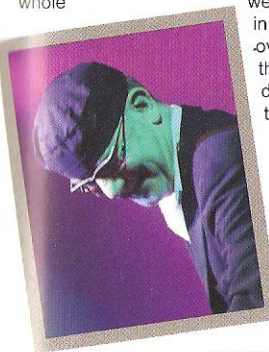
29/01 - 31/01/2010.

When Butlins promised something different for this year's festival, no-one envisaged that they would be arriving in a blizzard that would turn the holiday into a winter wonderland for the weekend! It might have been freezing cold outside but there was plenty of red hot Blues and Rock going on inside! It was a weekend of plenty necessitating some serious planning of what to see. No way could you do it all with the abundance of choice on offer! The Ben Walters Band began the weekend on Centre Stage and he soon had thoughts of snow and chill fading from the punters' memories, as he regaled them with some stylish and mean Blues and boogie woogie. Ben was followed on stage by those stalwarts of the British Blues, The Blues Band. From the opening chord, it was obvious they were there on form, not surprising with their collective Blues pedigree and longevity. A band of not just quality but versatility, Paul Jones took most of the vocal and it was interspersed by vocal performances by the others, adding variation to the fine instrumentals on display throughout. Down at Jak's, The Blues Matters Stage was winding-up for a great weekend of music with a classy performance by The Bare Bones Boogie Band. The Mick Rutherford Band took over next and soon had the crowd Bluesin' and Rockin' to their repertoire including a debut of their latest number 'Liverpool Lullaby'. The title though turned out to be somewhat of a misnomer in nature. Not a bedtime story but heavy weight Blues Rock of quality about their trip to The Cavern in 2008! Saturday lunchtime, and Centre Stage saw an afternoon of true 60s British Blues but this was no trip down memory lane. Classic Blues and RNB numbers were dusted down, innovated and reinvigorated by all the musicians, there was a lot of current music on show as well. First up was Gary Fletcher, doing a solo electro acoustic set. Not only a fine vocalist and guitarist, his songwriting technique, especially the lyrical content was highly impressive. Gary was followed by Scotland's 'Queen of the Blues', Maggie Bell with Dave Kelly. Maggie's vocal clarity and range was superb. Dave was no slacker in the vocal stakes either and his guitar work was an absolute pleasure to listen to. The final part of the afternoon's lunchtime session was The Animals. There was a general opinion among punters at the end that they were truly on a metaphorical mission to musically demolish Centre Stage. A classic and superb performance by all members of The Animals, one might even suggest one of their best to-date. Pete Barton's vocal was dynamite, deep, gritty, good range, innovation and that



vocal power of an opera singer. If this was not enough for the punters, down at Jak's Bar Gary Boner had organised another of those traditional Butlins 'Roadhouse Jams'. To a packed house, Roadhouse and guests were rockin' the joint to the rafters, much to the delight of the punters. The set got a lot of praise from punters and musicians alike as one of the highlights of the weekend. No festival is complete nowadays without Sean Webster, after moans about his absence; Sean popped up on the Pavilion Stage on Saturday afternoon and gave the punters an impromptu set! Saturday evening in Jak's opened with a band called Elephant Shelf. A diverse and interesting band, which can play Blues with a lot of enthusiasm and talent! Over in Reds, was to be found, the first of a number of sets representing the new generation of Blues musicians at Butlins. The Jay Tamkin Band started off the session. Jay had the crowd enthralled not only with his and the bands musical talent but also their showmanship, almost a modern throw back to the travelling medicine show phase of Blues history. Jay was followed by a Blues 'princess' Chantel McGregor and her band. Chantel's performance was probably one of the most stunning

of the weekend and a packed Reds took this young lady to their hearts. Not just because of her beauty and superb stage persona but her soulful heart wrenching vocal and that stunning guitar work on top. Mick Rutherford was watching and at the end he commented, "You look at this beautiful girl and her lovely voice and then you look at her hands on the guitar and she attacks those strings like a man!" Who says girls can't play guitar now? This was a cracker of a performance from Chantel and her band. Back down to Jak's and The Mustangs had a packed gig cheering and clapping at their riveting performance. Gwyn Aston's Two Man Blues Army closed the night in Jak's with panache. Australian Bluesman and UK drummer Kevin Hickman set the place alight with a top class performance of Blues Rock. After two excellent days of music one wondered, how could Butlins top things on Sunday? Jak's Bar started off Sunday afternoon with something different, a solo set and talk by Richard Newman. Richard has been a music producer for 40 years and made a documentary for Channel 4 called, "Living With The Blues". Which was a first hand history of the British Blues Boom. In between relating his memories of the 'hey day' of the 60s, he played a solo acoustic set of music from the likes of Son House and the other senior masters of the genre adding musical meat to his talk. This made a good diversion to the weekend, although primarily a music event, the addition of this, well, learning experience, especially for any of the younger punters present, is something that the Blues may wish to extend on, at future events and festivals. Butlins just the broke the ground on this one and the genre contains many top musicians who could carry on from this start and thus advance the Blues history and give it a higher profile. Sunday evening and onto the final frontier of the weekend, The Deborah Bonham Band who many expected to be a highlight of the weekend had a surprise in store for the punters, Deborah Bonham had arrived Saturday night in time to catch Chantel McGregor's performance and was immediately impressed with this young ladies' vocal, guitar work and stage presence. Deborah who was brought up among some of Blues-Rock royalty and one who can spot excellence when she sees it went straight back stage after Chantel's performance and immediately invited her to perform a duet with her the following night. Not only did this provide one of the classic moments of the whole weekend, it can also be suggested as one those moments in history which often get missed in the information overload of an event. It was an acceptance that among the new generation, there is a core of musicians developing who have all the drive and talent to carry on the Blues legacy for their and future generations and Chantel numbers in that company! The Deborah Bonham Band are truly set to make their mark in 2010 and this was clear throughout the bands' performance at Butlins, especially with the addition of two numbers from the new CD they are producing at present. One of these entitled 'Lightnin' Ray' was an instant success with the punters and received rapturous applause. A swampy Blues Rock number, the drum & bass combo gave it a very tribal feel. It conjured up images of Native American Indian tribal celebrations to their totem gods. Deborah's superb Blues Rock rendition with rocky guitar riffs made for a top class number. Their whole set was superb but one moment made virtually all the assembled hearts beat just a little faster. 'The Old Hyde' is lyrically a tear-jerker in its own right, add Deborah's emotive vocal on this song and it is a classic. Yet at Butlins, the addition of a tender guitar solo full of utter



humility for the occasion by Chantel McGregor had the crowd screaming for more and applause that was truly deafening. There are great moments in music, but this one was more than that, it was truly special! A quick move over to Centre Stage, to see the cult Blues band Nine Below Zero. They may have a long pedigree but true to the Blues legacy they didn't sit on their laurels and just churn out the classics, they started their set bravely with a new song entitled 'Mechanic Man' a Blues Rocker of character with some mighty harp work throughout. Butlins didn't scrimp on the final acts of weekend either with top class performances by Nazareth and Oli Brown to bring things to a glorious conclusion. The whole weekend had a far superior feel to 2009, choice, change and quality seemly the keywords in action at Butlins this year. The sound quality of the gigs seen was also top class, adding to a superb weekend. 2011 marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of Butlins and we await that with special interest!



photos Liz Aikem / Christine Moore