

Follow The Yellow Brick Road... Hangin' with the blues masters at Blue Heaven

words and pictures by Richard S. Foster

For years now, I've wanted to attend Blues Masters at the Crossroads, the annual concert weekend that Chad Kassem hosts at his Blue Heaven Studios in Salina, Kansas. Chad and I would talk about it during the year, I'd get all excited and then something would come along and dash my plans.

Finally in 2004, several members of the Phonogram list decided that not only were we going to go to Salina, but we were going to go and do something not many of us have ever had an opportunity to do. We wanted to follow the chain from the 'concert/recording studio' straight through to the finished product being pressed at a record pressing plant. Plans were co-ordinated with



musicians performing in the Blue Heaven Studios while Kevin Gray cut a couple of direct-to-disc recordings. We would then go on to California where the acetates would be made ready for pressing at the RTI facilities. I will discuss the California/RTI portion of this adventure in an upcoming issue, but for now I'm going to concentrate on the events in Salina.

The concerts are held in October and this time round it was Friday the 15th and Saturday the 16th of the month. I had no idea what to expect, and perhaps this was a good tack to take. What I experienced was one of the greatest weekends of music and friendship I'd ever encountered.



the co-operation of Chad, Kevin Gray (mastering/cutting engineer extraordinaire) and Don MacInnis, President of Record Technologies Incorporated. In a nutshell, the adventure was to go to Salina and hear the

Meeting fellow writer Dennis Davis and mutual friend Jeff Bernhard in Kansas City, we began the two plus hour journey to Salina on Wednesday the 13th. We arrived at our destination and immediately ran



► down to Acoustic Sounds to see what kind of goodies we could find. Needless to say there were more than we could carry and I think we all had records and CDs sent home via mail. The people at Acoustic Sounds including Mark, Clark, Patty, Ginger, Leslie and so many more, really bent over backwards to make our trip exceptionally memorable. Thank you all.



I remember walking into the Church – for that is what Blue Heaven Studios was – for the first time. It really was an awe-inspiring moment – it sort of takes your breath away. Every ounce of decor has been carefully restored while no expense has been spared in the wiring and outfitting of a fully-fledged recording studio. They've really done an outstanding job of maintaining the look, feel and great acoustics of the church, while not detracting from this when the studio portion was added to the rear of the building. Upstairs is a wonderful



From the Blues Masters Soup Kitchen

THURS. NIGHT 7:00
Bird's Ribs & Crawfish
Etouffee

FRIDAY LUNCH 1:00
Clark's Red Beans & Rice

FRIDAY NIGHT 5:45
Jim's Beef Brisket & beans

SATURDAY LUNCH 1:00
Charles' Gumbo

SATURDAY NIGHT 5:45
Chad's Chicken (whole
grilled chickens)

DISHES ON THE SIDE:

Louisiana sausage

Tipton sausage

Corn Bread

Mac & Cheese

Baked Beans

Cheezy Potatoes

Brookville Coleslaw

Crunchy Salad

Potatoe Salad

Strawberry Jello Salad

Apple Pizza Pie

Sweet Potatoe Pie

balcony and I don't think there is an acoustically bad seat in the house.

Downstairs in the basement is another small stage and a large area to walk around and mingle with guests and musicians. But the best part of the basement takes place in the back rooms. Here there is a large kitchen and eating area and this was one of the highlights of the weekend for all of us. Normally the kitchen is not open to the public but Chad invited us to partake in a very special event. He has a large group of friends who come in for this weekend and several of them are from Louisiana. Add to this some of the great staff at Acoustic Sounds who have a fine knowledge of all things Cajun and you have a recipe for some of the most delicious

and interesting foods you could imagine. There are lots of barbecue-ribs, chicken and brisket. There is also a lot of beans, Cajun crawfish, Crawfish étouffee, Louisiana sausage, red beans and rice as well as chicken and sausage gumbo. For desert, there are tons of pies including sweet potato and pumpkin. You just can't leave hungry! Walking through the kitchen and filling your plate, sitting and talking to some of the musicians, and just

▶ generally socializing and having a great time really made this one special event.

Kevin Gray (from AcousTech Mastering) and his wife Kathy also arrived midweek. It was great to spend time with them, but unfortunately it was a while before Kevin had any 'free time'. He spent countless hours working on the Neumann VMS70 cutting lathe. This is an



interesting animal in that it has Ortofon cutting heads and amplifiers rather than the Neumann originals. He was having problems with one of the amplifiers and it was literally only minutes before the concert was to begin on Friday evening that he finally got the beast working properly. It was a brilliant effort!

While he toiled away on Thursday and Friday, many of us were sitting in the church while musicians strolled in at various times to do sound checks for their prescribed sessions. On Saturday afternoon Kevin captured the great Jody Leroy Pierson in a 'studio' session direct-to-disc, followed later that day by Arthur Williams & Jesse Hoggard. These two direct-to-disc recordings are the ones on whose progress I'll be reporting. They will both soon be available so you'll be able to hear the end result of what I can only



Just some of the artists on the bill...

Sonny King
Cootie Stark
Homesick James
Millage Gilbert
King Alex

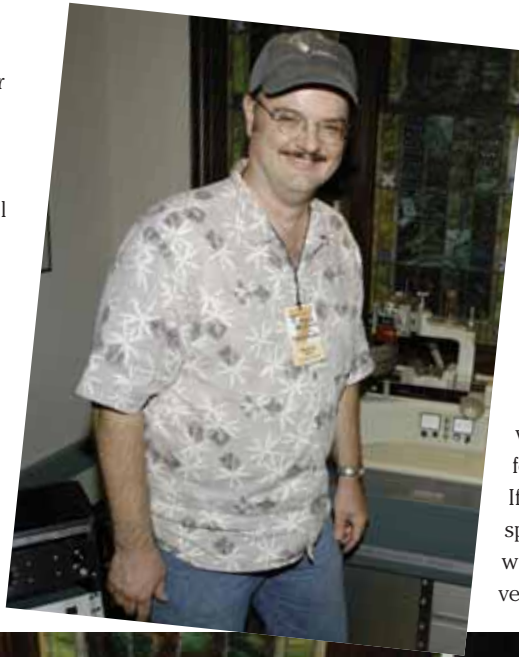
Leroy Jodie Pierson
Arthur Williams
Big George Brock
Robert Belfour
Son Seals

Texas Johnny Brown



otherwise describe in words. However, I'm in the fortunate position of not only having "been there" but also having heard the test pressings. They capture the excitement and unique atmosphere of this very special event perfectly and you'll be in for an aural treat when you buy them. This was the concept behind the adventure: hear the musicians live in the venue at the church and then have it captured by Kevin on direct-to-disc. The memory of this long weekend will be with me forever – reinforced by the aural window offered by the discs themselves. ▶

► As concerts go, this is one jam-packed musical weekend. No fewer than 16 acts appear in two evening sessions. The program began at approximately 7:15 in the evening and the last curtain call wasn't until a quarter after midnight. Ticket prices at the door are a measly \$40, and if that's not a bargain then I don't know what is. On top of the music there is a huge amount of activity going on in the background to further fascinate the audiophile, what with all the recording that's taking place. Katsuhiko Naito is the analogue recording engineer operating the main console and feeding the



This is one busy place. Gray was manning the lathe for both evenings and although he cut at least eight quality sides, I don't know how many of these will ever see the light of day. There are always contractual issues that arise with the artists or their managers and only time will tell if these two, two disc sets will be released.

This was such a wonderful weekend, I'm already looking forward to the event later this year. If you're an audiophile looking to spend one special weekend packed with music and great fun, this is the venue and event that I suggest you

explore. Salina might be in the middle of nowhere, but this a road trip with a goal – and what a goal. The words “I don't think we're in Kansas anymore...” will never be the same again!

The Blues Masters at the Crossroads concerts themselves are open to the public, but beyond that you'd need to talk to the organizers regarding access. Also bear in mind that there are a limited number of tickets.

This isn't the Stones at Madison Square Gardens. Just in case you didn't get the message, the music alone makes the trip worthwhile (and yes, I realize that many of you are on the other side of the Atlantic!). Outside of the concerts, Salina is pretty sleepy, but that's all part of the charm. For further information, please check with either Acoustic Sounds at <http://www.acousticsounds.com> or directly on the Blue Heaven Studios website located at <http://www.blueheavenstudios.com>.



tape machines while Dawn Frank, an SACD engineer was doing her digital thing. Both are extremely busy for the entire weekend. Chad also had a full HDTV/DVD crew in, recording the concert on both evenings with no fewer than four digital video cameras going. Other players heavily involved include Micajah Ryan the house recording engineer for Blue Heaven, Oz Fritz, Brad Johnson and Travis Scanlan.

