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SAN FRANCISCO BLUES FESTIVAL

September 26-28, 2008

By Stephen Camelio

Despite a strong musical heritage that includes the Grateful Dead and Metallica, the city of San Francisco isn't on the short list with Chicago and New Orleans on the first places to come to mind when most people think of the blues. But with the oldest ongoing blues festival in the country, the City by the Bay is a must-visit for true fans of this uniquely American music style. Part of the festival's draw is it's picturesque setting at the Great Meadow, a swath of green in the Marina District framed by the stunning backdrop of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay and hills of San Francisco. But the main attraction for blues lovers is the true-blue lineup that festival producer Tom Mazzolini has signed every year since 1973. "A lot of blues festivals dilute the bill with pop artists," Mazzolini says, "But people who attend our festival will be hearing the real thing." Over the years the festival has featured a variety of blues subgenres from Delta to West Coast, and this year, with Texas bluesman Johnny Winter, Louisiana legend Buckwheat Zydeco, second generation Chicago guitarist Elmore James Jr. and acoustic band Hot Tuna on the bill, the 36th annual concert promises to be exceptional. The festival kicks off on Friday the 26th with a free concert honoring legend John Lee Hooker at the Justin Herman Plaza near the iconic Ferry Building by the Bay. In conjunction with the festival, the Roxie Theatre (roxie.com) will host a blues film series from September 26 to October 2 featuring "John Lee Hooker: Come and See About Me" and a Muddy Waters film. With all that is going on, Mazzolini, a blues aficionado in his own right, says, "I know I am not going to be bored." And neither will you.

STAY:

To channel the vibe of the festival stay at the Hotel Triton. This hip, eco-friendly boutique establishment features celebrity-designed rooms including Carlos Santana's Black Magic Bedroom and the J. Garcia Suite designed by the late Jerry Garcia (doubles from \$189; Celebrity rooms from \$339). Music fans will also dig the rock star-friendly Phoenix Hotel (jdvhotels.com/phoenix: doubles from \$169), where you might just run into Pearl Jam or Radiohead in the lobby. Situated in the rough-around-the-edges Tenderloin district, the Phoenix is near many bars and clubs and is only four blocks from the Great American Music Hall (gamh.com), a 100-year-old concert venue where you can check out alternative and local acts.

SUSTENANCE:

San Francisco has no shortage of great restaurants, but few would make a blues musician sing praises more than 1300 Fillmore (1300fillmore.com). The décor of Jazz-era photos from the Fillmore neighborhood's heyday blends perfectly with chef David Lawrence's down-home cuisine created with fresh California ingredients such as the shrimp hush puppies and black eyed pea cake. If you need a meal to get you going before the festival, try Dottie's True Blue Café (522 Jones St, (415) 885-2767) in the Tenderloin. There's going to be a line, but it's worth wait for the diner-style breakfast fare and the homemade baked goods - try the grilled spicy cornbread - at this local favorite.

WEATHER:

With a comfortable 71-degree average temperature, September is the warmest month of the year in San Francisco, so you should be in store for perfect weather. But bring a light jacket just in case.

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