

16th annual Blues and Jazz to wow? locals this weekend



By Constance Scrafield

The now famous 16th annual Orangeville Blues and Jazz Festival is this weekend, running from Friday, June 1 to Sunday, June 3. As if to prove beyond doubt the benefit to the local economy of the arts, as many as 30,000 visitors come here to enjoy the almost all free concerts of some of the biggest names in blues and jazz.

This year, award winners Sugaray Rayford, Robi Botos, Raoul and the Big Time, Kelly Lee Evans and Alex Cuba are among the 80 acts the festival brings to town.

Those 30,000 visitors do not pay admission to get into town but they spend their money locally and discover this very special place. There are tickets to two venues: the Main Stage and the Opera House for a single price of \$5.

So we were lucky to catch the festival's founder, Larry Kurtz, for a conversation.

Said he, "I am very excited about who we have coming. This is one of our best line-ups ever. A weekend pass is \$5 to see both Juno winners. Sugaray is playing in Muskoka this week and the tickets there are \$95."

As to how it goes together, he says, "It's not magic, just hard work and having a really good team of people who are dedicated to it. At the beginning, I was a two-person wood-working business and there's 200 volunteers who step up now. Lots of people came in with skills that I don't have. So, now, everybody's working on what they're best at,

"Just having the enthusiasm for the music, I get to meet a lot more interesting people that I would never meet just running a wood business. Meeting people from all walks of life? I really enjoy that."

About the money: "A very small group of people fund-raise. We have sponsorship and government grants. Gary Brown is the one writing for grants and he's successful but they're not easy. They're 70-page documents? hours and hours, putting together all the information surveys from visitors and reporting back to the government. They require lots of information. we only make a really small percentage of our income from vendors or admission.

"We can only plan on what we know. We have to have the money before we start. The least favourite part for me is the money but it's the most important."

About who is playing: "We actually have 70 per cent of our performers who are local. That wasn't in my mind when I started but I soon realized that we have so much talent? just because they're local doesn't mean they're less talented. The festival is one of the places they can be showcased to a wider audience? new people in the area don't really know the scene.

"My goal originally was to bring in the best of the best in Canada? internationally as well. We're not huge, so people are out there you may not have heard of. People only want to hear what they already know but there's so much great talent out there that needs to be heard? that's one reason for the festival - to hear something new."

"I think people know they may not know the musicians but they know they are going to be good.

"From outside, we're very well known in the Canada Blues theme. I hear a lot of great feedback. The Toronto Blues Society umbrella for the blues music in Canada. Two years ago I got an award for the Blues Booster.

"Also, the kind of submissions I get from musicians from Europe and Australia. A lot of people want to come and play here. The festival is known internationally."

In many this is the hardest part of the work for Mr Kurtz.

"So, regarding the line-up, there's a lot of research. The most impossible task is to narrow it down. Certainly, the visitors from all

over have heard about the festival and tell their friends.?

A pause to reflect that, ?Only 16 years, it's really amazing ? a huge organizational job and a lot of people behind it. It helps that we're not-for-profit and community-based, run by volunteers.?

He added, ?We're really proud of it.?