

PRESS RELEASE:

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26th Annual "Billtown Blues Challenge" Festival Audition Concert to be Held Saturday March, 24,2018

The time has come again for the Billtown Blues Association, BBA, to hold their 26th annual "Billtown Blues Challenge" Festival Audition Concert where local and regional musicians compete for the coveted spot on the BBA festival stage performing along with confirmed national and international acts.

The BBA Audition Concert is set for **Saturday, March 24, 2018** in the Genetti Hotel Ballroom, 200 West 4th Street, Williamsport, PA. The Solo/Duo competition starts at **4:00pm** and the Band competition begins at **6:00pm**. Doors open at **3:00pm**. Admission is \$15 for the general public, \$10 for Billtown Blues Association members. Continuing with the same event format, the judges for this important event are drawn from the BBA current membership. All members are eligible to receive a ballot and participate in the judging process as long as ballots are obtained prior to the first note of the event.

Selected to open the concert at 3:30p, is guitarist, singer and songwriter **David Chubirka**. a student from the Uptown Music Collective.

Competing in the Solo/Duo category are Washingtonville based, **SOS Blues Duo with Sweeney and Sallows**, **Gage Avery** from Hughesville and **Christopher LaRose** from Lock Haven. In the Band competition is the Scranton based **JP Williams Blues Band**, the **Gabe Stillman Band** from Williamsport, **the Benjamin Vo Blues Band**, from Lititz, **Natascha & the Spy Boys** from State College and **The Backyard Ponies** from Lewisburg.

All performers were required to apply through a submission process and all criteria and performance rules align with those set forth by the Blues Foundation in Memphis TN. Although the #1 prize for the winners is a guaranteed performance spot on the Festival main stage, winners also become eligible to register in the prestigious International Blues Challenge in Memphis held the following January.

Performers are judged in the following categories: Blues Content, Originality, Vocals, Instrumental Talent and Stage Presence. For more information visit the Blues Foundation website www.blues.org. Participants are not judged against each other but only through a numeric scoring system.

The event will also offer an opportunity for new member signups and membership renewals, as well as the last opportunity to purchase 2018 Billtown Blues Festival tickets at the Early Bird price of \$25.

www.billtownblues.org www.facebook.com/billtownblues

Audition Concert Lineup:

4pm start time for Solo/Duo performers:

1) SOS Blues Duo with Sweeney and Sallows

The SOS Blues Duo was founded in 2017. John Sweeney is on harmonica, guitar and vocals, and Mike Sallows is on lead guitar and vocals. John is from Jerseytown PA, and has played blues throughout the area in several different groups. He plays with Rosencrans and Sweeney, Sweeney Blues Revue, Hickey and Sweeney, and with Mike Sallows as the SOS Blues Duo. John performed in the past with the Barn Cats and with Ann Kerstetter. John is part of the Destination Blues Festival, which is planning it's fifth year, and does blues education through their "Backstage Pass to the Blues" program. Mike Sallows recently moved to Bloomsburg, PA from Pittsburgh. He played with the Rockin' Reptiles, who shared stages with many blues greats including John Mayall, Big Bill Bronzy, Big Walter Horton, Buckwheat Zydeco, Buddy Guy, Susan Tedeschi, Johnny Winter, and even backed up Bo Diddley. Mike was president of the Pittsburgh Blues Society and hosted their blues jam for many years. The SOS Blues Duo formed from a mutual interest in being creative within the blues tradition. Whatever blues style they play, it is always in the groove!

2) Gage Avery

"At a young age, Gage Avery was introduced to the blues, beginning with the Uptown Music Collective's 24-hour Blues-a-Thon. Soon after he began playing some hard driving blues with the Black Strat Blues Company which took him on a journey to Nashville, Memphis, and the crossroads of Clarksdale, Mississippi. Now the eighteen-year-old hailing from Hughesville Pennsylvania, has gone solo with his blend of originals, traditional blues, fingerstyle, and country, and has taken this acoustic collection of songs to places such as Barrel 135, Franco's Lounge, and was introduced to the local blues scene at last year's 2017 Audition Concert opener.

3) Chris LaRose

Chris LaRose hails from Lock Haven Pennsylvania; growing up in garages restoring vintage motorcycles with his family and friends has had a unique impact on his music style. Chris's concerts range from driving blues, upbeat 50's rockabilly, to traditional folk, ballads, and soulful originals. He feels honored to have played several shows with Grammy award-winning Native American artist Joanne Shenandoah both in America and in Europe. He has recently returned from his latest tour through Germany performing a series of Pennsylvania Dutch oriented shows including traditional folk songs, new originals, and the world's only 1950's Rockabilly music sung completely in Pennsylvania Dutch. Chris credits his father, John H. LaRose, Jr. (1952-2017), for passing on his love of music. "My father was a musician for over thirty years before I was even an idea. He rescued and performed many songs during the folk music boom in the 1970's. He frequently worked with wonderful musicians such as Debby McClatchy, Bonnie Raitt, John Jackson, Elizabeth Cotton, Ola Belle Reed, and many others on song and story collecting. He used to drive hours and hours away deep into small mountain towns to meet an old lumberman, or a miner, and have them sing him old work songs so they

would be preserved just a little while longer. My goal is to pick up where he left off; learning, performing, and protecting music and stories on the verge of being lost.” Chris is proud to announce the release of his second album, "Chris LaRose: Ain't Got Worry" which has been recognized internationally with songs like, “A Grave For My Gun” winner of the 2016 Global Peace Song Awards, and “Pepper Hill” winner of the 2017 Pennsylvania Heritage Songwriting Contest. An avid history preservationist, Chris has dedicated his life to helping keep history alive and well for future generations through the message of Peace Through Music. Chris can be found anywhere the music takes him, from Rockabilly shows in California and Nevada, Originals and Blues in Montana speakeasies, Folk and Appalachian traditional music in the Pennsylvania hills, Pennsylvania German music and adaptations in Europe, and anything in between. More information can be found at www.chrislarosemusic.com

6pm start time for Band performers:

1) JP Williams Blues Band

JP Williams first started performing acoustic Folk & Blues music in college coffee houses and local nightclubs in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. He then moved to his birthplace, NYC where he performed for several years at many local famous nightclubs in the city with other aspiring singer/songwriters and musicians. He continued to write songs and perform after returning to Pennsylvania, as a solo act and with many successful local bands, after many years, he ceased performing to concentrate on his business and family. In early 2014, he decided that it was time to once again pursue the music that he loved. Now he performs his original songs and traditional blues regularly with an extraordinary group of talented musicians.

JP Williams Blues (Duo/Trio/Full Band) is currently enjoying success and performing at many festivals & local nightclubs throughout Northeastern Pa. as well as recording three successful CD releases.

Eddie (The Harp) Czarkowski - has been performing and accompanying musicians on harmonica in various style of music including Blues, Bluegrass and Country music. He was nominated this past year for “Best Sideman Musician of 2017” by the Steamtown Music Awards - Scranton Wilkes-Barre

Bob Strunk is a talented bassist, singer, and songwriter in his right who has performed in bands and duos since his youth, His solid bass lines form the foundation of the blues performed by the band.

Jack Roberts is a seasoned drummer whose credits include not only blues music but a wide range of musical genres and styles that he has been actively sought after to play with numerous musicians. He is widely acknowledged by his peers as a superbly talented and “rock-steady performer.

2) Gabe Stillman Band

The Gabe Stillman Band is a high-voltage blues trio that electrifies audiences with performances that showcase the band's passion, musical prowess, and the joy they take in playing music together. While their sound is unmistakably rooted in the blues, the band plays both original and cover songs that draw deeply from the well of Soul, R&B, Funk, and New Orleans music. Led by ace guitarist and singer Gabe Stillman who formed the band in 2015, shortly after graduating from Boston's Berklee College of Music, and backed by bassist Colin Beatty and drummer Jesse Roedts, Stillman and company have been steadily climbing to the top of the regional blues circuit with standout performances at venues large and small. In addition to sharing stages with blues royalty, The Nighthawks, and Chicago powerhouse, Toronzo Cannon, they've won over crowds at the Lancaster Roots & Blues Festival, the Destination Blues Festival, and the annual Billtown Blues Festival.

3) Benjamin Vo Blues Band

Benjamin Vo (guitar/vocals) – I started playing guitar when I was 10 years old. My dad and uncle both played classical Spanish guitar. They showed me how to play a few things and then I really got into it. Reading music notation never interested me (but maybe someday). Listening, playing by ear, intuition, a strong sense of rhythm, and emotional expression are all important elements to me as a musician. I started diving into studying the blues deeply and developing my playing style after hearing BB King's "Worried Dream". As long as the music has the right *feel*, I love it. I especially love Peter Green's lyrical and poetic guitar phrasing, the lonely melancholy of Skip James, and Otis Spann's loose and soulful style.

Mark Hennessey (bass) – Mark has been involved with the band in one role or another from the beginning. He's produced all of my home recordings so far, played second guitar, and has currently taken over bass duties (apparently, he stole the instrument from his sister). Coming from a musical family as well as being classically trained, he's a natural with his timing and melody. He's also always willing to bring the thunder at the drop of a hat when we stretch out in extended jams.

Mike Titzer (keys) – Mike came into the band at a time when I was looking for someone to add a bit of that "rumble and tinkle" only a piano can do. I also wanted to avoid the typical trio format of guitar/bass/drums. His playing comes from more of the New Orleans style, but he's not too far from Chicago. He may be a little older than the rest of us in the band, but he's usually the first to pound a beer or three.

Joel Stoltzfus (drums) – My biggest challenge when I put together this band was finding a drummer that could hit behind the beat like the old players. I was fortunate enough to meet Joel at an open jam. I had Joel come over to play with us and he pulled off the old school style right out of the gate. I was surprised to learn that he had never played in a band before. Although having played in drumline in school and studied under an instructor, Joel plays in a very organic fashion. His hair is often the talk of the crowd at shows (he uses TRESemme' shampoo).

4) Natascha & The Spy Boys

Natascha & The Spy Boys play an eclectic mix of blues, jazz, soul, swing & pop.

Natascha, from Berlin, Germany, has a unique, soulful voice that covers a wide range of styles -- from sultry jazz ballads & snappy swing songs to belting out straight-up, full-on blues & soul tunes.

John "JT Blues" Thompson, award-winning piano player who's been playing for decades -- solo as well as in a number of local bands (Triple A, Maxwell Strait), Body and Soul) and national acts. He supplies the boogie, the woogie, and all other important KEY elements.

Robert Gardner is a bassist, conductor and composer who teaches at the Penn State School of Music. As a bassist, Robert has performed with many talented musicians (including Bobby McFerrin, DEVO, and members of WAR), and he has recorded original music in several genres. He joined the Spy Boys in the spring of 2016.

Doug McMinn has enjoyed a long career as both bandleader and sideman, starting with the Killer Bees Swing Band in 1980. He has played a dizzying array of musical styles ranging from reggae to modern jazz, but he always returns to the blues. Doug has jammed onstage with blues luminaries ranging from EG Kight to Lonnie Shields, and was privileged to play a set with Chicago blues master Bob Margolin. He backed up pianist Dave Keyes at the Billtown Blues Festival (one of 11 appearances at the BBF), and has appeared on 8 CDS, including EG Kight's "Sugar" and his own "Doug McMinn Blues Band Live." Most recently, he led a band to support upcoming blues star Vanessa Collier. He has been playing reeds since 1964, has amassed a thick songbook of compositions, and is a fine, shouting blues singer.

Last, but certainly not least is our very own drum machine, Mr. **Stubby Stubbs**, who never misses a beat.

5) The Backyard Ponies

The Backyard Ponies is comprised of Chris Trasatti on harmonica, Mike Balliet on guitar, Tim Latshaw on bass and Sean Madden on drums, with all members contributing vocals. Chris, Tim, and Sean met at a weekly open mic where they became friends. They decided to join their accomplished musical feats with their love of blues by forming the amazing band The Backyard Ponies. They then asked another friend and bandmate, Mike, to join with them in creating a magical sound of different types of blues. The band came together officially in October 2015. While they have all performed professionally in other bands for many years, they decided to play some blues for fun during a break in their schedules. Some serious magic happened, and it went from a fun project to a full-time band.

Chris Trasatti was born in Philadelphia. As an adult he left the city and chose the quiet small-town life. At the age of 45, his family gave him a birthday present of a \$3 harmonica shrink wrapped with a little instruction booklet. He became an accomplished self-taught player and continues to practice every day learning new techniques. He has been part of several bands, playing different types of genres but always returning to his passion of playing the blues.

Mike Balliet bought his first guitar himself at the age of 15, selling his BMX to get it. It was pointy, shiny, and almost never stayed in tune. He tried guitar lessons briefly but was a terrible student and ultimately took what he knew from 6 years of saxophone in school and taught himself. At the time he was convinced if he had long hair and a big enough amplifier, everything would fall into place. Time in working bands convinced him

that angry music and leather pants wasn't going to bring the girls out, so he learned to play music the people like to hear, and more importantly, dance to. He continues to challenge himself musically by his new-found love of the blues.

Tim Latshaw has been playing music in front of live audiences for over 40 years. By default, he was the bass player in his early bands since he was the only guy who owned a bass guitar. He was the founding member of a popular Pennsylvania band which has been entertaining people in the region for decades. Tim has worked as a session player at several recording studios and has worked with various artists and bands. It's his fourth decade as bassist, guitarist, and vocalist. He also performs as a soloist with his original music. Tim has taught guitar and bass and hosts a monthly open jam.

Sean Madden's parents were tired of missing boxes and other percussion generating household items. So, they purchased him a drum set at age 11. By age 13 he was playing in a garage band which led him to the beginning of his musical career. After graduating high school, the drums were put away and he began a 20 plus year layoff before reuniting with his original band in 2007 when he began playing again. Sean enjoys laying down groove infused blues drum beats for the band and providing back up vocals. He is also a member of the house band for two local open mic nights.

The members, both individually and together have played across the country, including Nashville, Disney World, the Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center, and the Finger Lakes region of New York.

The Backyard Ponies play all different types of blues, enhancing the individual talents of each member with various songs, including some original music in the near future. They like to play a good mix of well-known blues like "Whipping Post" and "The Thrill is Gone" along with lesser-known tunes that deserve to be heard.

They enjoy engaging with the audience and getting them up and moving. The more fun the people have, and more fun they have.