

BLUES

Matt O'Ree

with Crash, Bruce Wacker Band and John Sonntag

Where: The Saint, 601 Main St., Asbury Park

When: Thursday. Show starts at 8:30 p.m.; O'Ree performs at 10 p.m.

How much: \$8. Call (732) 775-9144 or visit www.thesaintnj.com, or www.mattoree.com.

BY STEVEN SNYDER
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Matt O'Ree's got the blues so bad, he's good.

Actually, he's so good, the 34-year-old, Holmdel bluesman was crowned King of the Blues in Chicago last month.

The guitarist/songwriter had emerged from a pack of 4,000 musicians to become the last man standing in Guitarmageddon, a nationwide talent competition sponsored by Guitar Center.

And on that June 8 night, as more than 1,500 blues fans were introduced for the first time to O'Ree's sound — a style some call Texas blues, others call Chicago blues, but all agree evokes the striking intensity of such blues greats as Stevie Ray Vaughan, Jimmie Vaughan and even Jimi Hendrix — they discovered something New Jersey fans have known for quite some time: O'Ree can play.

For his part, O'Ree is taking the win in stride, all but blushing when he recalls one recent posting on his MySpace.com home page that pronounced, "First there was Jimi, then there was Stevie. Now there's Matt."

For the dozens of other blues fans who wrote in to O'Ree before his coronation, or following him as he toured the region over the last 20 years, his success is no surprise.

"He plays with such fire, passion and accuracy," says Tony Pallagrosi, a long-time concert promoter who most recently booked O'Ree for a show at the Starland Ballroom. He plays again



Holmdel's Matt O'Ree won out over 4,000 competitors to be crowned King of the Blues last month at the Chicago House of Blues.

Blues big shot

Guitarist/songwriter Matt O'Ree has moved ahead of pack

Thursday at The Saint in Asbury Park. "He's one of the great guitar players out there, and I've heard a lot."

After leaving the competition with more than \$40,000 in prizes from the national music store chain, as well as the kind of buzz that any emerging bluesman would kill for. His three CDs — crafted between 1998 and 2005 and

evolving from straight blues to a more guitar-driven, ZZ Top-ish, rock-based blues — have been selling better than ever on his Web site, just as endorsements have started falling into his lap, and the gigs keep getting bigger.

On Aug. 12, he'll open for Blues Traveler at Six Flags Great Adventure.

For O'Ree, though, one high-

light towers above all others: Making B.B. King smile.

"It was surreal," he says, his soft voice filled with appreciation. "Most of the other players had Fender guitars, but I know he plays a Gibson; and when I found out I was going to meet the King, I knew I was going to have to bring my Gibson guitar.

"The moment I walked in,"

O'Ree says, "he had a big grin on his face because he knew it was a Gibson."

It was then, O'Ree says, that he knew he had arrived.

First picking up the guitar when he was nine, and then again at 13 ("once I had a better attention span"), O'Ree points to the Hendrix album "Are You Experienced?" as the record that changed how he thought about music.

The more he read about Hendrix and discovered the artists who influenced him, the more O'Ree found himself listening to the likes of B.B. King, John Lee Hooker and Rory Gallagher. After high school, he went on to study audio engineering at Brookdale Community College, and interned at a recording studio.

Notoriety was not far away. He was selected as a 1996 finalist for the prestigious Jimi Hendrix Electric Guitar Competition, invited to play at Les Paul's birthday party and awarded four 2005 Asbury Music Awards, including best guitarist, best local release, for his album "Shelf Life," and best song of the year.

O'Ree is also widely praised for his singing (Pallagrosi says "he's really an amazing vocalist") and his original lyrics.

All along the way, O'Ree has taught what he's learned to other guitarists as a private instructor, and despite his crown, he says he's not going to raise his prices.

"I'm just trying to make a living so I can afford to keep playing," he says. "I'm more interested that the students get something out of it, not that I get rich off them."

In fact, he says he hopes his success helps his students, and other Jersey bluesmen, get the respect they deserve.

"You talk about blues and you think of Chicago, Memphis, Austin — but there's a lot of great blues players here, too," he says. "I hope any success I'm having will help fans discover them, too."