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MATT O'REE

STAYS TRUE TO
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MOVIES: 3
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THEATER: 11
THIS 'PETER PAN'
SOARS

DINING: 18
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MATT O'REE BLUES

STAYS TRUE TO HIS
MUSIC WHEREVER HE GOES

TRAVELER



By **MARK VOGER** | Staff Writer

1972 WAS A YEAR, as any blues-rock geek will tell you, when some Earth-shaking excrement went down.

The Rolling Stones released their masterpiece "Exile on Main Street." The riff that launched a million air-guitarists was heard for the first

time in "Smoke on the Water." And Robin Trower quit Procol Harum – the guitarist's first step toward solo stardom.

That last milestone went unnoticed by Matt O'Ree, who was born the same year in Neptune.

If Trower has a spiritual descendant, it is singer/guitarist O'Ree, whose sound seems to have cribbed the best from Trower and his cohorts in "superblues" – Jimi Hendrix, Johnny Winter, Rory Gallagher – and combined them in a cosmic blender with a dash of Jersey bar-band 'tude.

"Matt is somebody who has sort of fused the ages," says harmonica player "Big Nancy" Swarbrick, another light of the Central Jersey music scene.

"He captures the essence of the '70s and puts his own spin on it, turning it into something completely new, something completely Matt O'Ree."

Guitarist Billy Hector, also a familiar face on area stages, tips his trademark cap to O'Ree.

"I congratulate him," says Hector.

"I knew him when. I remember when he played me his tapes in the early '90s. That was a long time ago. I don't even know if he was 20 years old yet. He was good *then*. Everybody knew he was coming up."

Guitarist Chuck Lambert, another scene

veteran, calls O'Ree "a true bluesman."

"His expression of the blues is not about posturing or 'wannabe,'" Lambert says. "We've shared some good times onstage *and* in the 'green room.' He's a kindred spirit."

This is a special time for O'Ree.

On Saturday, he will mark the release of "Matt O'Ree Live," a nine-song DVD/CD collection, at the newly reopened Downtown Cafe in Red Bank, 10 years "to the month" after O'Ree launched his debut CD, "88 Miles," at the same venue. The DVD was filmed at the Starland Ballroom in Sayreville with Lance Taylor on bass and Bob Pantella on drums.

"I always wanted to make a live record, because I've always felt that some of our music comes across better live than it does on an actual studio recording," O'Ree says.

It was O'Ree's friend Michael Pomarico – an Emmy winner who works for ABC Television – who suggested, and ultimately produced, the DVD. O'Ree was filmed performing with and without an audience.

"That way, we had alternate takes of every song and multiple camera angles," the guitarist says. "I think it really portrays what we do live, where we're at as a band, pretty accurately."

O'Ree, 36, grew up in Holmdel, where he still resides.

"Obviously, most of my gigs in high school were either coffeeshouses or, like, a rock show that the school would put on," the guitarist recalls.

The Red Bank-based Matt O'Ree Band (formerly known as the Blues Hounds)

was formed in 1994. Current members are O'Ree, Eric Safka on keyboards (a new edition), Taylor on bass and Lew Rosengrant on drums.

In 2006, O'Ree won the "Guitarmageddon King of the Blues" national guitar competition named for blues legend B.B. King, who was in attendance at the finals held at the House of Blues in Chicago.

"It was one of those moments when, after all those years of slugging it out, I felt like I finally *got* someplace," O'Ree says. "It was just a great moment. Like, 'Wow, I finally accomplished something.' Getting to meet B.B. King was fantastic."

The honor has its reverberations. O'Ree – who owns 30 guitars – has an endorsement from Gibson guitars, makers of the Les Paul model, O'Ree's guitar of choice.

The Matt O'Ree Band plays six or seven gigs a month, more in the summer. Favorite venues include the Starland Ballroom and the Downtown Cafe, as well as The Stone Pony in Asbury Park, Leggett's Sand Bar in Manasquan and Magee's West Side Tavern in Point Pleasant. O'Ree is booked to headline the 22nd annual Red Bank Jazz and Blues Festival on May 30; the festival will run through June 1.

But as much as O'Ree loves the Shore circuit, he longs to break out. (On Saturday, O'Ree is to return from a week of gigging in Chile.)

"Our current goal is to be out on tour in different states, obviously," he says.

"If you just keep playing the same area over and over again, eventually it's going to get burned out. You *have* to leave, really."

ON THE WEB:

Go to www.app.com and click on **Entertainment** and this story for more about Matt O'Ree.

MATT O'REE LIVE DVD/CD RELEASE PARTY

9 P.M. SATURDAY ★ DOWNTOWN CAFE, 8 W. FRONT ST., RED BANK

\$5 ★ (732) 741-2828 ★ WWW.THEDOWNTOWNNJ.COM

Matt O'Ree will headline the 22nd annual Red Bank Jazz and Blues Festival on May 30.

(MICHAEL SYPNIEWSKI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)