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B.B. King crowns Holmdel guitar player

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Matt O'Ree wins national competition; named best unsigned blues guitarist

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HOLMDEL - Matt O'Ree is no stranger to the blues.

The Holmdel native, who has been playing guitar since the age of 13, was recently crowned Guitar Center's Guitarmageddon King of the Blues by B.B. King himself.

"It was amazing. It had to be the best moment of my life - so far," said O'Ree.

The competition took place at the House of Blues in Chicago on June 8. O'Ree beat out more than 3,000 hopefuls to claim the honor of best unsigned blues guitarist in the country. He said when he heard about the contest, he knew he had to win it. Friends and family read his horoscopes throughout, hoping for some insight into the musician's fate. When he made it as one of the seven finalists and picked the last spot at random, he knew then he would take the prize, he said.

The grand prize package consisted of, among other things, a Toyota 2006 Scion, shopping sprees at Guitar Center and Levi's, a trip to Los Angeles, and a one-year endorsement deal with Gibson guitars.

John Mayer was one of the judges, along with Rick Neilson of Cheap Trick and other prominent names in the music industry. Cheech Marin hosted the event.

O'Ree said he hopes to get signed to a record label and get the band on a national tour. Winning the contest has also won him greater exposure. More people are interested in his music and looking to hear more, he said.

"I see things looking up, big-time," said Atomic Bob, the drummer who has been playing with O'Ree for 13 years.

Winning the contest was not O'Ree's first big break, however. He has been an opening act for such acts as Buddy Guy, Kansas, Johnny Winter and Gretchen Wilson, among others. Two of the acts he opened for that stand out in his mind the most are Government Mule and Robin Trower, a big influence on his own music, O'Ree said.

O'Ree has made music a full-time gig, playing out at night and teaching guitar during the day. As a teen, he fell in love with the craft when his brother brought home a Jimi Hendrix record. Soon after, his uncle bought him a guitar, and O'Ree began teaching himself to play. He said he had always hoped he would make it to where he is today.

"You have good days and bad days, the bad days when you doubt yourself. But I never doubted I'd be doing this," O'Ree said.

O'Ree will be playing in Austin, Texas, at the National Association of Musical Merchants' (NAMM) summer session with Jimmy Vaughn, Stevie Ray Vaughn's brother, July 13-16. Locally, he will be performing at Six Flags Great Adventure with Blues Traveler on Aug. 12.