



THE NEW KING OF THE BLUES

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by Gary Wien

Throughout the last six months, Guitar Center went looking across the country for the next great blues player. When all was said and done and the smoke cleared, they found the next "King of the Blues" in Holmdel, New Jersey. That's not a surprise to us. In fact, we could have saved them a lot of time...

The "king" is no less than Matt O'Ree, a great guitarist that has been lighting up the clubs in this area for some time now. After winning a total of five rounds of competition against great guitarists from all points of the nation (over 4,000 musicians), Matt was officially named Guitar Center's Guitarmageddon's King of the Blues.

Just don't call him that...

"There's only one King of the Blues and that's B.B. King," said Matt O'Ree. "It's definitely a great honor for them to recognize all of the work I've put into it all these years."

The contest started in March and ended with the final showdown in Chicago at the House of Blues. Matt O'Ree had won four competitions in Manhattan to reach the finals. Each win brought Matt a few more prizes and brought him more attention on a national level.

Word is actually just getting out about the win, which may be working to Matt's advantage. Instead of getting the news out and forgotten quickly, it's been building up slowly.

"It's funny," said O'Ree. "I keep getting emails from people saying 'Wow! Congratulations! We just heard...' Meanwhile I'm thinking it seemed so long ago even though it was just a few months." More people are bound to know about his win in the next few weeks - hundreds of thousands of people, in fact, when coverage of the competition shows up in the next Guitar World magazine. Speaking of guitars, Matt received a Gibson guitar for each round he won. And by winning the King Of The Blues title, he took home more than \$40,000 in prizes, including a 2006 Scion tC, a trip to L.A. to record with Grammy-winning producer Pete Anderson, a one-year Gibson endorsement deal, a Gibson 59 reissue, and a Gibson GA20 amplifier, among other prizes. "All of the Gibsons that I won were all guitars on my list of things that I've always wanted to own. So, I'm keeping them all!"

According to the 10 judges, which included Rick Neilson (Cheap Trick), Hubert Sumlin (Descriptor), Dave Mason (Traffic), and Marcy Levy (Eric Clapton), O'Ree excelled in the categories of originality, technique, style, stage presence and overall performance.

It's been a great year for Matt O'Ree since we last wrote about him in Upstage. He won four Asbury Music Awards (Best Blues Band, Best Guitarist, Best Local Release - "Shelf Life", and Best Song Of The Year - "Saints & Sinners"), then in June won the Acoustic Showdown in Red Bank before leaving for Chicago and coming back with the Guitarmageddon title. Other than winning the competition, Matt says his favorite experiences through it all include meeting Cheech Marin (who was the MC of the finals in Chicago) and meeting B.B. King.

"Definitely meeting B.B. King and just being able to shake his hand," said O'Ree. "He was quite thrilled when I walking into the dressing room because most of the other contestants were playing

guitars other than Gibson, so when I walked in he had that great big smile on his face to see me holding a Les Paul.

"It was just an awesome experience. The House of Blues was probably one of the best sounding stages I've ever had. The sound company was great. The band was great. Obviously, when the sound is that much better on stage you're able to perform that much better because you're more comfortable. And sharing the stage with B.B. King and John Mayer was a great, great honor." For a blues guy, his last CD was a damn good rock and roll album. Matt doesn't know what direction his next recording might go. It might be another rock record or a live record or more of a blues disc - it all depends on where he feels he's at and whether or not he can get signed to an independent label. He's been shopping "Shelf Life" around and hopes the newfound recognition might help him.

"My theory is that I hate to keep making the same record over and over again," explained O'Ree. "So, whatever style that leads down whatever road that happens to be we'll just go with it and see what happens."

It's hard to convey just how humble Matt O'Ree really is. He's been that way for as long as I've known him and I doubt he'll ever change. Seeing him after his big win he acted as if nothing had changed. Well, at that moment maybe things really hadn't changed much, but there's no doubt that things are going to change for him soon. And there's nobody more deserving of getting a break than Matt O'Ree. He's paid his dues in Jersey bars for too long, it's time for him to take the next step.

"I'm just thankful to be anywhere in the music business and to be able to play guitar everyday is a blessing. So, I'm always thankful for that and it's always in the back of my mind."