

Third UK Blues Challenge

The Robin 2, Bilston

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The UK Blues Challenge is the pick of this country's blues artists, competing for the opportunity to represent the country in the annual European Blues Challenge and, this year for the first time, the chance to participate in the International Blues Challenge in Memphis.

Previous participants in the EBC competition Babajack and Red Butler, PR supremo Peter Noble, representatives of Upton Blues Festival (this year's sponsors) and other movers and shakers in the blues made up the judging panel. They had their work cut out with almost all aspects of the blues represented: from the roots rock warriors Wille & The Bandits to the upbeat sound of Dove & The Boweevil via the blues soul holler of Kaz Hawkins and current female blues vocalist of the year, Rebecca Downes. Whilst the judges had to decide upon one name, we punters were the true winners, being treated to the best blues line up this side of any festival.

Wille & The Bandits opened. A throbbing six-string bass groove courtesy of Matt Brooks, was joined by the award winning drums of Andy Naumann, an infectious launchpad for Wille Edwards' glorious slide and coffee-grinder voice; a mesmeric rendition of 'Bad News': wowing fans and newcomers alike, summoning the power of Zeppelin or perhaps a rootsy Pearl Jam. 'Gypsy Woman', followed with rhythmic partners again creating an infectious funk-ridden groove: Wille slid up and down his fretboard hollering the track's punchy hook, the crowd responding in kind, transfixed by the band's collision of power and depth. Picking highlights from a short Wille & The Bandits set is rather like picking your favourite child but I have to mention the added tongue drums of the mantra-like 'Chill Out' and the frenzied finale of 'Virgin Eyes', leaving an audience chanting the band's name in appreciation.

Dove & Boweevil made the most of their time treading the boards, offering an impressive but very different take on the blues, weaving elements of soul, country and pop into an upbeat, fun set. Kicking off with the New Orleans inspired 'Lady Lavoo', the five-piece combined funky keyboard (Andy 'Mojo' Robinson) with Mark Howes' expressive lead guitar, before Lauren Dove's vocals swoop and soar; the band's rhythm section (Paul Williams and Paul Weston) drive the song on. 'Food For Love' sees Howes don a slide, as the band lay out their blues credentials with a stomping beat and Dove leading the line. The Hammond of Robinson was the star on 'Red Eye Fly', duetting with Howes' guitar; the joy of performance was etched across Lauren's face as she brought the band to a close with 'Fireworks'.

Northern Ireland's blues belter Kaz Hawkins was up next and as soon as she opened her

mouth, jaws hit the floor: here was a singer

the often-covered number. Rebecca donned a leopard skin-patterned guitar to trade licks



that has it all, sass, soul, emotion and power. Whether in front of the mic, acoustic guitar hung around her neck, or leading with a swish of her dress, it was impossible not to focus your full attention on Kaz. If 'Don't Make Me Cry' had the emotional pull, it was the addictive 'Drink With The Devil' that really set the party mood. Kaz's vocals soared one minute and became a raw rasp the next as she showcased her incredible range, her band stomping out a taut rhythm allowing guitarist Nick McConkey to embellish with a flurry of riffs and solos. Kaz, winning over new fans with every song, fed off the audience enthusiasm, delivering a stunning, soul-stirring 'Because You Love Me'; no one was going to forget her set in a hurry.

Local favourite, Rebecca Downes closed with a set of blues rockers but it was the soulful rendition of 'Piece Of My Heart' that really made me sit up and take notice: her weathered vocals bringing another dimension to

with guitarist and co-writer Steve Birkett, the band ran through a number of tracks from this year's sterling *Believe*, with 'Long Long Time' and a bewitching take on 'Sailing On A Pool of Tears' showcasing Rebecca's versatility, whilst the guitar and keyboard interplay and strident chorus of the album's title track had a now busy dance floor howling in delight as Downes exerted every last morsel of energy, bringing down the curtain on the UK Blues Challenge.

It was over to the judges to run a rule over a brilliant night's entertainment, leaving Ashwyn Smith of The UK Blues Federation to announce the winner: Kaz Hawkins. After collecting the trophy and shedding tears of joy, the stage was set for Kaz to deliver a second set to an audience in the mood to party. The Nina Simone staple 'Feeling Good' was given a spellbinding Hawkins makeover before 'Shake' drew the night to a sensational close.

Will Munn

Images: Graham Munn