

Czech Republic's Oldest Blues Festival Keeps the Blues Alive



The Blues Alive Festival, the oldest blues festival in the Czech Republic, came into being in the Šumperk Arts Centre in 1996. During the 23 years of its existence, the then one-day local event staging six Czech bands has become a three-day festival attracting artists and fans from around the world. Having gained global prestige, it is frequented by the biggest stars of the blues.

Throughout the evolution of the Blues Alive Festival, three basic themes have remained constant. The first is the effort to make up, if possible, what blues, rock and jazz fans missed during the era of communist totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia from 1948–1989. At that time, it was unthinkable for artists from the Western world – but especially America – to perform on Czech stages. After 1989, the Šumperk Arts Centre festival hosted legendary blues performers such as James Cotton, Hubert Sumlin, Louisiana Red, Cephas & Wiggins and Johnny Winter for the first time, bringing foreign blues to the Czech Republic.

The second theme concentrates on featuring contemporary blues artists in their prime. Many current representatives of the blues have performed at Blues Alive, including Chris Thomas King,

Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Jonny Lang, Warren Haynes, Shemekia Copeland, Lurrie Bell, Eric Bibb, Otis Taylor, Fantastic Negrito and Mr. Sipp. Every year, many Blues Alive performers can be found among the nominees or winners of prestigious music accolades like the Blues Music Awards or Grammy Awards.

And thirdly, Blues Alive continues its scouting role. It carefully follows the events in the hotbed of the music world and brings new artists, often at the beginning of stellar careers, to Šumperk. Blues Alive has enabled a number of artists to make their debut on the Šumperk stage in front of a Czech audience, many of whom become popular with fans and are then invited to other Czech festivals and clubs. The festival has hosted its Blues Aperitif scouting competition for 20 years, an opportunity for promising Czech musicians, as well as talents from neighboring countries like Poland, Slovakia and Austria. Winning the competition, or even just going through to the finals, has helped many musicians enter the industry.

The Blues Alive Festival prides itself on media attention both at home and abroad. Many years of Blues Alive have been recorded and broadcasted by public Czech Television and Czech Radio. The festival's announcements, reviews, and interviews with artists and organizers are regularly published both in press and specialized music periodicals. The festival has twice won the "Event of the Year – World" award in the annual Blues Top poll by the prestigious Polish music magazine *Twój Blues*.

So far, the biggest success abroad for the Blues Alive Festival came from the United States in 2019 when it was presented the most important award a blues festival can achieve: the Keeping the Blues Alive Award. Representatives of the festival collected the award personally at the ceremony in Memphis on January 25, 2019.

This year, Blues Alive celebrates its 24th festival November 14–16, welcoming fans from around the world to celebrate the blues. For more information, visit www.bluesalive.cz. 🎵



Ondrej Bezr and Štěpán Suchochleb of the Blues Alive Festival team accepted the KBA Award at the ceremony in Memphis on January 25, 2019. Photo © Roger Stephenson