THE BLUES AND THE BURN

Winthrop Rhythm & Blues Festival Receives Keeping the Blues Alive Award for Crisis Response

By Polly O'Keary

As the Winthrop Music Association organizers made the final preparations for the 27th annual Winthrop Rhythm & Blues Festival in 2014, the weather, which had been beautiful for months, seemed the least of their worries.

Summer fires, though, are part of life in eastern Washington, so when a mid-July's Tuesday night lightning storm started a handful of fires in the hills, it caused little concern.

Thursday, as volunteers and vendors continued to set up, things changed. Overnight, the fires had literally exploded to more than 40,000 acres. Within the day, its size quadrupled and the fire could be seen across the river from Winthrop.

The Carlton Complex Fire became the largest fire in state history, and before the weekend was over, 312 homes would be lost.

Friday morning, festival organizers Erika Olsen and Jimmy Smith began what they would later describe as one of the most stressful days of their lives. Three thousand blues fans and some of the nation's most prominent blues musicians were headed for the Blues Ranch, the festival's location.

Organizers struggled with the decision whether to cancel the event. Even a hint of risk would be enough to cancel. The idea of trying to evacuate several thousand people out narrow Highway 20, the only viable exit, was unnerving at best.

All morning long, Smith and Olsen stayed in close contact with Tom Stokesberry, a California firefighter serving as the U.S. Forest Service public information officer.

"They were in no imminent danger," Stokesberry said later. "They had several natural barriers, including a river and a highway, and the wind was pushing the fire the other way."

In fact, Olsen said, according to experts, the Blues Ranch was the safest spot in the Methow Valley. Fire officials just asked that the festival advise people that power was out at hotels and stores in Winthrop and gasoline was running low.

The organizers decided the event should go on. But many fans turned back, and many vendors and bands were stuck on the east side of the fire. News reports were conflicted, one erroneously reported Winthrop might be evacuated.

"It was changing every hour," Smith said.

Olsen and others, in between addressing crises of cancellations from vendors, volunteers, security staff and headliners, checked in regularly on social media to set the record straight with their fans – the festival was safe and would go on.

Furthermore, they posted, as a music community long accustomed to using music to raise funds in response to crises, the festival would turn its attention to supporting the valley that had been its home for 27 years.

As the first event was getting set up, arriving fans and workers drifted in groups, staring at the columns of smoke rising across the river. Everyone talked about the fire. They also talked about what could be done to help.

That night, as spouts of flames erupted on the horizon, emcee Anita White, better known as "Lady A" who is a raucous fundraiser for The Cove Foodbank in Twisp, worked the crowd harder than ever, passing a bucket through the crowd again and again, asking fans to help those who were losing everything. Olsen thought the festival could do more.

"I went to the Red Cross in the middle of the night, and said, 'Let people know they can come here and get a shower and a meal,'" she said. Within 24 hours, more than 100 fire refugees had made their way to the festival grounds.

"They were coming to the beer garden, talking about the fire, and happy to have a place to camp," said Olsen. "Some didn't know if they still had houses."

Beyond a shower, a hot meal and a place to camp, the festival provided emotional relief, said Brook Robin Berhle, a Twisp resident and longtime festival attendee. She headed to the festival along with displaced neighbors, many of whom didn't know if their homes would still be standing when they returned.

"Dancing is a good release," said Berhle. "That's why I thought the festival was beneficial to people. Just for a while, for a song, you could forget all the trouble. You could dance. You could be merry for a minute."

Even the entertainers pitched in: Charlie Musselwhite donated $1,000 of his performance fee, guest keyboardist Jim Pugh donated a portion of his fee, and Carolyn Wonderland canceled her appearance but gave anyway. Too Slim and the Taildraggers did even more.

The band, who drove a harrowing, roundabout route from the east through the fire zones to arrive, has performed at the festival each year but one.

They offered to come back and play again at the end of August to support a benefit for fire victims. Erika Olsen and Jimmy Smith volunteered to organize it. On August 29, 2014, Too Slim and the Taildraggers and other musicians, as well as several hundred blues fans and locals, made their way to Winthrop's Red Barn for Blues for the Burn, which raised thousands to help the community rebuild.

The help was badly needed. Many residents had been out of work for more than a week while the area had been without power. Some had lost homes.

"We had people who needed help with utilities, gas vouchers, rentals, and we had more than 60 families come in for help with bills they couldn't pay, because of the lack of work," said Glenn Schmekel, Director of The Cove. "A lot of people had lost all the food in their houses when the refrigerators and freezers went off. We paid to help people get their food back."

Blues for the Burn attracted a standing-room-only crowd of more than 400. Music fans responded to the need, listening to Too Slim and the Taildraggers, Honey and the Killer Beez, Greg Hardy and Fred Cooley, and donated what they could.

"It was so awesome to see that benefit," Behrle said. "It brought out the best of everyone, to get together, and put in our energy for the people who had to go through a major life change."

"We raised about $12,000 at Blues for the Burn," said Smith. "That, with about $8,000 that fans gave in the beer garden, is about $20,000. And with what the bands gave, the festival probably collected $25,000 for fire victims."

The festival also took a financial blow, but it will survive, said Smith. Attendance was down about 30 percent, and although the numbers aren't calculated yet, festival losses could reach $30,000. However, the nonprofit festival has been saving money to prepare for disasters like this one, and is still solvent, he said.

"We couldn't take too many hits like this," he said. "But we will survive this one."

This year's festival is July 17-19.

Bringing the festival through the weekend was the single hardest thing, outside of giving birth to her daughter, that she has ever done, said Erika Olsen. But when it was over, there was a sense of accomplishment.

The Carlton Complex Fire ominously burned near the Winthrop Rhythm & Blues Festival Photo by Andy Cotton

The Homemade Jamz Blues Band redefined the term "smoking set" at the 2014 Winthrop Rhythm & Blues Festival in Washington Photo by Jill Sonsteby

Rumors about mandatory evacuations fueled no-shows at the festival Photo by Jill Sonsteby

So impressed was Soul of John Black keyboardist Jim Pugh, that that he wrote a letter nominating the Winthrop Rhythm & Blues Festival for a prestigious Keeping the Blues Alive (KBA) award for the festival's humanitarian efforts. He's seen a lot of festivals, he wrote, but had never seen anything like that one.

"They really stand alone in being kind and thorough, but in the case of this year's festival, they went way beyond that into an area of kindness that was almost mystical to witness," wrote Pugh. "It was a profound experience and has left me a little less jaded."

"The festival has always been about more than having a good time," said Smith. "It's also about a relationship between the music community and the Methow Valley."

"The blues festival is a tradition," he said. "It's been happening almost three decades. For generations of fans and people who live there, the festival means a lot – not only economically, but spiritually. It's a healing thing. It brings spirit to the valley for that time. We all survived an incredible disaster, but we'll be back." ♫

Polly O'Keary is a Seattle bass player, singer and songwriter who has toured nationally with Too Slim and the Taildraggers, The Soul of John Black, The Randy Oxford Band and her own trio, Polly O'Keary and the Rhythm Method. She is also a former newspaper reporter and editor, and currently splits her time between touring and working on her Ph.D. in communication at the University of Washington.

Too Slim and the Taildraggers, who have played 26 of these 27 annual festivals, took a perilous journey though fire zones to appear onstage Photo by Andy Cotton