

# Chicago Blues Fest Honors Delmark Label

**JIMMY JOHNSON DOESN'T REVEAL HIS** age, as he made abundantly clear June 8 during his afternoon duo set at the 35th annual Chicago Blues Festival. So, let's just say that Johnson is an outstanding singer-guitarist who happens to be 89. He proved that several hours later at Millennium Park's Pritzker Pavilion with a fiery rendition of Magic Sam's "I've Been Down So Long" during a salute to the 65th anniversary of Chicago's Delmark Records.

Introduced by emcee Dick Shurman as "the last man standing" among a generation of post-war Southern bluesmen who called Chicago's West Side home, Johnson stood out during the set among 18 artists who have plied their trade at the venerable Chicago blues and jazz label. Accompanied by the solid, jazz-influenced guitar licks of Dave Specter, who led the backing band with a steady hand, Johnson displayed amazing instrumental dexterity and an emotion-drenched tenor on the Magic Sam number.

Johnson's star turn led directly into "Hoodoo Man Blues," a finale that made good use of most of the musicians who appeared during the program, particularly harmonica player and vocalist Omar Coleman. The iconic song from the 1965 Junior Wells album that put Delmark on the blues map was a welcome

choice, and certainly more fitting than the countless versions of "Sweet Home Chicago" that customarily draw the curtain on such ensemble programs.

Bob Koester, who founded the label as "Delmar," named for a boulevard in St. Louis before moving to Chicago and adding the "k" for his last name, appeared at a morning panel discussion. "It started as a hobby for me," the 85-year-old Koester said. "The blues



Jimmy Johnson performs at the Chicago Blues Festival on June 8.

have been more commercially successful [than jazz] for the label, which surprised the hell out of me." *Hoodoo Man Blues*, along with Magic Sam's 1967 LP *West Side Soul*, remain two of Delmark's enduring treasures.

The evening program expanded on a theme introduced by a recent Delmark's tribute album that honors many of the label's blues stalwarts of the 1960s and '70s. It was released in conjunction with the anniversary and the company's sale in April to a pair of Chicago musician/educators. New owners Julia A. Miller and Elbio Barilari proclaimed their commitment to releasing new music in addition to servicing Delmark's back catalog.

After three days of dicey weather, a thick fog shrouded the downtown skyline, adding to the drama of the June 10 headlining performance by soul-gospel great and civil rights pioneer Mavis Staples, 78. Staples sprinkled favorites from her beloved family band, such as "Respect Yourself," "Freedom Highway" and the closer, "I'll Take You There," with numbers from her latest album, *If All I Was Was Black*, including the defiant "Who Told You That" and the healing "Build A Bridge." She was in particularly fine form for her Chicago homecoming show. —Jeff Johnson

# Playboy Fest Spotlights New Talent, Genre Titans

**FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ITS 40-YEAR HISTO-**ry, the Playboy Jazz Festival returned to the Hollywood Bowl without its founder, Hugh Hefner, who passed away in September at the age of 91. Apart from a brief tribute delivered by his son, Cooper, it was business as usual for the venerable two-day event at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles.

The festival sometimes can feel like it's jazz in name only; this year, soul singer Anthony Hamilton and venerable funk group Tower of Power closed out Saturday and Sunday, respectively. But before they brought their more mainstream sounds to the stage, Playboy Jazz served up an admirably eclectic lineup, highlighted by forward-thinking young jazz ensembles (Kneebody, Snarky Puppy), living legends (Charles Lloyd, Lee Ritenour) and crowd-pleasing newcomers (pianist Matthew Whitaker).

The lineup was especially strong on rising stars from Latin America and included 26-year-old Havana singer Daymé Arocena, who came across as an Afro-Cuban Ella Fitzgerald, scatting

over her trio's rumbas and cha-cha-chas, and radiating charisma as she exhorted the audience to sing along to her "Don't Unplug My Body."

After an occasionally rambling, but often fascinating, set by tenor saxophonist Charles Lloyd and the Marvels, with Lucinda Williams providing an earthy presence on vocals, Ramsey Lewis took the stage with his quintet. Lewis, who's set to retire at the end of 2018, remains a polarizing figure, viewed by some as a soul-jazz pioneer and others as a pop lightweight. But on Sunday night, none of that mattered, as he delivered a rollicking, age-defying set.

Lewis, 83, seemed uninterested in revisiting his most famous, mid-'60s period, instead focusing on work from the '70s. After opening with "Tequila Mockingbird," the breezy title track from his 1977 album, the pianist teasingly told the audience, "I don't know if you're all ready for this." He then launched into a medley of covers that were his set's highlights: a version of The Stylistics' Philly soul ballad "Betcha By Golly, Wow" and a confidently funky take on Stevie



Daymé Arocena performs June 9 during the Playboy Jazz Festival at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles.

Wonder's "Living For The City." From there, Lewis had the audience in the palm of his hand, leading his excellent band through a variety of styles, from blues to rumba to boogie-woogie.

Lewis' set demonstrated, in convincing fashion, why he's outlasted his critics—an observation that also could be made of the Playboy Jazz Festival itself, which remains a smartly programmed showcase for its titular genre, despite its more pop-minded headliners.

—Andy Hermann