

From Austin to London to Ottawa: The Texas Horns hone their identity

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The Texas Horns

6-7 p.m. July 6, Bluesville Stage

Imagine my surprise last month when I walked into London's Royal Albert Hall to see blues legend Eric Clapton, and some other familiar faces on that hallowed stage.

There was long, tall Texan Mark "Kaz" Kazanoff blowing his tenor sax, with his horn-mates John Mills on baritone and Al Gomez on trumpet. They were part of the band backing Clapton's pal, Jimmie Vaughan, who opened the show.

Any Ottawa music fan in the sold-out crowd that night would have recognized the trio as The Texas Horns. After 18 years as Bluesfest's resident horn section, they're something of an institution at the festival, happy to sit in with touring blues acts but often showing up to back non-blues artists, too.

I shouldn't have been surprised to see them with Vaughan, a fellow Texan, after some of the more unlikely pairings witnessed at the festival over the years. I recall them fattening up the sound of solo didgeridoo dude Xavier Rudd, facilitating a romp in the rain with electro-pop hitmaker Coleman Hell and brassifying the funky reggae party created by Michael Franti and Spearhead in 2005.

"Somewhere I have a list that's pages long of all the acts we worked with at Bluesfest," said Kazanoff, attributing the pace to the hustle of former Bluesfest board member Connor Grimes and his knack for musical matchmaking.

"Back then, Connor would be dashing all over the festival, from stage to stage. You never knew what was coming up. It was so seat-of-the-pants, which in some ways it still is," said the 69-year-old Austin resident.

For him, highlights of that list involve artists who are close to his musical heart, including legends such as Bonnie Raitt and The Allman Brothers Band. But there are also fond memories of shows that worked out remarkably well, even when they didn't know the music. Ottawa singer Bella Cat is one that stands out.

“Sometimes you never know,” he said. “That time we played with Bella Cat — it was a beautiful afternoon. We didn’t know any of her songs, we were totally out in left field. Her songs move around a little bit with bridges and choruses and pre-choruses, and we were really working to stay on top of it. We had to really use both sides of our brains to keep up.

“That happens, and we love it and we’re really good at it,” he added, warning me that he’s about to toot his own horn, so to speak. “There are not a lot of horn players in the world that can get together as a threesome and do what we do. Most play by themselves. They’re great improvisers but they don’t think as a group. We’re fortunate because we’ve worked together that way for so long.”

Bluesfest has been a driving force in the Texas Horns’ career since Kazanoff formed the group. In 1999, he was touring with Colin James’ Little Big Band project, made a stop at Bluesfest and immediately clicked with Grimes and others, including executive director Mark Monahan. A subsequent email from Grimes prompted Kazanoff to get serious about his horn-section-for-hire idea, partly to have a reason to return to Bluesfest and escape the heat of a Texas summer. “We were, at that point, far from a group that had its own identity,” Kaz said. “We were hired guns.”

For the first decade, The Texas Horns went where they were needed, landing residencies at other festivals and gigging with various acts, including their longstanding relationship with Jimmie Vaughan.

Eventually they felt a desire to record, and in 2015, released *Blues Gotta Hold on Me*, an album that paid tribute to the RnB and blues stars that influenced them. Now there’s a fine new record, *Get Here Quick*, that showcases the musicians’ own songwriting, the tracks fleshed out by a blues who’s-who of guests, including Curtis Salgado, Ronnie Earle, John Nemeth, Carolyn Wonderland, Red Young and more.

With Ottawa’s Chaffey Brothers acting as their band, the Horns will celebrate the new recording at Bluesfest on July 6. You’ll still see them at the festival’s blues jam in the Barney Danson Theatre and popping up with any act that wants a horn section, but it’s also a thrill to have their own slot.

“Ottawa Bluesfest is totally at the very top of our gig list,” Kaz said. “We look forward to it so much every year, and it’s become such a part of our identity as The Texas Horns to not only be the resident horn section but also to be doing our own show now. There’s nothing like it for us.”

(The Horns also play a post-fest club show at Irene’s Pub on July 17.)