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## Home-grown guitarist wows 'em

### MATT O'REE A FAVORITE AT RED BANK JAZZ, BLUES FESTIVAL

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When Matt O'Ree got ready to rock the 15,000 to 20,000 people at the Red Bank Jazz and Blues festival Friday night, the gathering gray clouds in the sky didn't dare talk back.

If a force of music could keep the rain in those clouds, then maybe this four-piece band, which headlined the festival's opening day, did it.

"He sounds awesome, incredible," said Chris Cordasco, here. "I came just to hear him."

O'Ree, a New Jersey native, is the hot blues-rock guitarist who was crowned "King of the Blues guitar" by bluesman B.B. King in the 2006 Guitarmeddon competition, beating 4,000 competitors for the title. Friday he demonstrated why he got the honor.

"To hear this locally is amazing. It's undiscovered music," Cordasco said. "More people should be here."

Not that there was a lot of room to put any more people. When O'Ree hit the stage around 8:30 p.m., it seemed every space on the hill, which forms a natural amphitheater in front of the main stage, was packed with people, some in chairs, some on blankets and many of them standing.

"He is one of Jersey's home grown, he's one of the areas biggest guitar players," said Steve Levendusky of Union Beach, who said he's known O'Ree for at least 15 years. "He's downright good people."

And O'Ree proved to be a downright great player, trading off guitar solos and doing a call and response with Eric Safka on the Hammond B-3 organ.

The show brought out other musicians who said they were happy to be spectators for O'Ree.

Photographer, drummer and dancer Jennie A. Meares of Matawan remembered a past Jazz Festival performance by O'Ree's in which he played "Amazing Grace" and then covered the Jimi Hendrix version of Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower." In true Hendrix fashion, O'Ree capped the performance by setting fire to his guitar.

"He first put goose bumps on everyone with 'Amazing Grace' and then he goes to play 'Watchtower' and puts lighter fluid on his guitar," Meares recalled. "I was back stage and captured his flaming guitar (on film). I'm happily surprised he's back."

She recalled that O'Ree was nervous before taking the stage that night, which she later realized was because of the flaming guitar.

"He said "People are either going to hate it or love it," she remembered.

Meares said she's been coming to the festival "as long as its been going on." She stopped to hear the Long Gone Daddies play at the Riverfront Stage to an appreciative crowd sitting around tables and gathered to the side of the stage.

"It's a rite of the seasons passing and just the ultimate combination of everything I love — music, good food, dancing," Meares said of the festival.

She was a little worried about the weather, but knew from past years it wouldn't stop the show.

"It's a little sketchy with the clouds," she said. "I've been here during many storms, people just come with their poncho in a bag. So many people come prepared to have a good time."

Other musicians included guitarist Chris Thomas, who was there with his wife and 2-year-old son Christopher Thomas Jr., who provided his own entertainment, dancing and playing a harmonica.

"It's his first year walking and getting around. He hears me play and now he wants to get up there," Thomas said, wrangling his son who was running around in front of the stage. "If I'd been playing, he'd show me up."

While Mikey Junior & Stone Cold Blues were playing, it was Chris Jr. who stole the show for Sergio and Margie DeCandia of Marlboro, who had two seats in the front. The DeCandias said they didn't come out to hear any particular band last night.

"We just came out to have a nice night out with my daughter and her co-worker and my wife," Sergio DeCandia said.

The festival also brought the return of former Shore Area residents, including Herbert and Michelle Smith of Melbourne, Fla., formerly of Fair Haven.

"We've always come. We don't know who's playing; we just want to listen to the music," Michelle Smith said.

The festival continues at noon today with headliner Greg Piccolo and Heavy Juice, performing blues, jazz reggae and rock. Piccolo has played with the legendary group Room Full of Blues.

Final shows Sunday start at noon and the headliner, Ron Sunshine and His Orchestra, hits the stage at 4:30 p.m., playing the classics by Duke Ellington, Red Bank native Count Basie and Frank Sinatra.

Admission to the three-day, rain-or-shine, festival is free.