

cincy bluesfest

16th annual music festival features a wide variety of performers



DAVID SORCHER | CIN WEEKLY

Jake Speed and the Freddies will be one of the featured attractions at the 2008 Cincy Blues Fest.

RODNEY WILSON CIN WEEKLY CONTRIBUTOR

There have probably been breakup songs since the beginning of music. But only one genre so completely embodies heartbreak that mournful sorrow fills every note from start to finish. This genre, of course, is the blues.

This weekend, Cincinnati will host two days of blues for the 16th annual Cincy Blues Fest, a gathering of some of the finest national, regional and local blues players the scene has to offer.

This year's Blues Fest offers something for anyone who's ever been heartbroken – or who can appreciate the sweet sound of sorrow.

WATERMELON SLIM

This year's headliner, Watermelon Slim, is a career bluesman, going strong since the '70s. A slide guitarist with a gravelly voice and Mississippi

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: Cincy Blues Fest

WHEN: 5 p.m. to midnight Friday and 2:30 p.m. to midnight Saturday, Aug. 1-2. Complete schedule at www.cincyblues.org.

WHERE: Sawyer Point, Pete Rose Way, downtown

PRICE: \$7 Friday, \$10 Saturday; free to children under 12 (with parent) and Blues Society members

PARKING: Bicentennial Commons lot or nearby lots and garages (prices vary)

CONTACT: www.cincyblues.org

ETC: Proceeds go to the Cincy Blues Society's Blues in the Schools program, educating local students on the history and styles of blues music.

Delta style, Slim and his band, the Workers, play songs that harken back to the roots of blues music. The group plays at 10:15 p.m. Saturday at the Main Stage, P&G Pavilion.

"I grew up in the South in

the 1950s and early '60s, at the end of Jim Crow (racial segregation)," explains Slim. "We were middle-class, and my mother and grandmother both had black 'maids,' as they were called, to do cleaning, cooking and child-minding."

He recalls one housekeeper named Beulah who would sing songs by the likes of John Lee Hooker around the house. "I didn't know for at least a decade whose songs it was she was quoting, but that was the first live music I ever saw close up besides my ma signing lullabies," he says. "I didn't know it was the blues then, but I know now."

For Slim, singing the blues isn't about gaining attention or success – in fact, he's only been getting wide recognition for his work in the past few years.

"I'm not just interested in it, I am it," he says. "Each performance is a sharing of my life with you. I've made a series of life decisions that have focused



SUBMITTED

Watermelon Slim will headline this year's Blues Fest.

me, made me a professional at what I had always been a recognized unique stylist in. In general, in life – although I have a long, strong streak of pessimism – I can't wait to see what's gonna happen next!

"But I've lived a life, and I am now at liberty to sing about it. How's the saying go? 'Those who act in haste are condemned to repent at leisure.'"

JAKE SPEED

On the other end of the spectrum is local Jake Speed, a newcomer to the Blues Fest lineup and (along with the other acts dubbed "alternablues" by the festival) not an obvious choice. After all, Speed and his band, the Freddie's, play songs often described as "old-timey," blending Depression-era genres such as ragtime and bluegrass with his unique take on American folk music.

But, as Speed points out, his music flows from the same river that feeds even the most traditional blues song.

"Blues music laid the foundation for pretty much all American music, especially the country, folk or bluegrass music that we play," says Speed, whose band plays at 6:30 p.m. Friday at the

Arches AlternaBlues Stage.

"The blues drew up the palette, and country, folk and bluegrass just colored it up in between the lines. The early country and folk singers like Jimmie Rodgers, Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams borrowed those song structures, added different instruments like the banjo, mandolin, fiddle and steel guitar, and called it 'country' music. Our music mimics those old country singers, thus indirectly mimicking the old blues singers, thereby sneaking us in the back door of this festival by a half a blue note."

Speed acknowledges other differences between his music and traditional blues – he employs too many lyrics to cop a blues singing style, and his lyrics are more about the woes of history than the woes of the human heart – but the biggest difference is his age. At just 30, he's playing a festival with people who were making music before he was even born.

"It reminds me of the feeling you get when you play that Strong-Man-High-Striker-Ring-the-Bell game at a church festival and can only swing the hammer hard enough to make it halfway up," says Speed of playing with music legends. "Like that, but swetier."