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Born to be blue

New club forms to promote music in Chippewa Valley

By Rob Hanson

Leader-Telegram staff

Beginning with the earliest days of the Chippewa Valley Blues Society, the No. 1 goal has been "to preserve, cultivate and support the blues."

Four meetings and a couple of jam sessions later, the club has attracted 100 blues aficionados - all eager to support the cause.

"We've got enough people coming for a good foundation," president and founder Ken Fulgione said. "And we wanted to start a society."

The society, which is the first blues-oriented group in the area since the 1970s, holds monthly meetings at varying venues and focuses on fundraising to promote blues shows around town.

Meetings usually feature open-mic blues jams as well. The jams have featured local blues acts and are a chance for anyone to bring equipment and join in.

At the last meeting, at Sammy's Pizza Palace on London Road, committee formation and Web site development were highest on the agenda. About 40 members attended, and eight more members and three corporate sponsors also joined the ranks.

"It's slowly getting bigger, and it's getting stronger," Fulgione said. "Different bands from around town get to jam together, and it's kind of the first opportunity for them to play together or even see each other because they all work on the same nights."

The group is organizing a fundraiser dubbed "Lust for Blues" on March 15 at Westgate Sportsman Club.

"One of the biggest goals that I envisioned for the Blues Society is to bring entertainment to the area," club Vice President Mike "Snapshot" Vanderwalle said. "Typically the clubs around town can only hold 100 or 200 people max, and to bring a major act in you would have to charge 50 bucks a head. They can't afford it. So if we can raise some money here and there with fundraisers, the society can sponsor a major act and take the pressure off the bar or sponsor something ourselves like an outdoor event."

Vanderwalle said that one of the biggest acts the Blues Coalition Festival has snared to date, E.C. Scott, cost nearly \$4,000 to bring to town in 2007, a tab that most area venues generally will not spring for.

"If you want quality entertainment, you've got to



Chippewa Valley Blues Society has formed to promote blues music and attract blues concerts. Monthly meetings typically include a jam session. From left, drummer John LeBrun, singer-guitarist Joe Thielen, bass guitarist John VanDeVoort, all of Eau Claire, and guitarist Allan Servoss of New Auburn played at this month's meeting at Sammy's Pizza Palace.

Staff photo by Dan Reiland

What: Chippewa Valley Blues Society meeting.

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 12.

Where: Westgate Sportsman Club, 4909 Sportsman Drive.

Phone: 577-4197.

Web: cvblues.com.

have the money," Vanderwalle added. "And through the society we will have ways to raise that money, and for people who love the blues, they will also attend because they know what's going on and when it's going on."

Society members also have decided to make an effort to have all-ages events with earlier start times.

"We're going to start (the events) at six," Vanderwalle said. "So people that want to come and that are older or go to bed early or the farmer that has to get up at 5:30 and milk the cows, they can come out and have a good time and still get their rest."

Though neither plays an instrument, Fulgione and Vanderwalle have been key elements in the local scene through their love for the blues.

Aside from the society, Fulgione also runs the Coalition Blues Festival, which features local blues bands and a few national acts, every September in Owen Park and city clubs.

The Chippewa Valley Blues Society has been promoted through Vanderwalle's radio program on Sunday nights on WMEQ-FM (92.1). Vanderwalle also is set to begin a television series called "Blues Power" on Community TV, also on Sunday nights at 10 p.m. The program will air live shows from national blues acts and recordings of local musicians.

The Chippewa Valley Blues Society also hopes to collaborate with groups in Wausau, La Crosse and the Twin Cities to route shows through the area.

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