



When guitarist Dana Gaynor, onstage left, vocalist Charlie Brown, center, and Bobby Soul on bass turned up their Notorious Groove, the audience had trouble sitting still.

Top-notch entertainment in a laid-back environment

Raven's Nest rocks in the BluesFest

Mason Loika

How can you tell you're in a real blues club? Look around and see how many musicians are there. If the room is filled with sax players, drummers, guitar players, belt-out-a-song soul survivors and their respective entourages, you've struck gold. Such is the case each year on the day before Easter at the Raven's Nest outside Quakertown.

The BluesFest has become a must-see event among Upper Bucks musicians, as evidenced by this year's lineup. The 17th annual event, emceed for the sixth consecutive year on March 22 by John Ruby, was jam-packed with eight rocking bands.

Blue Money, Chicago Carl, Real Trouble Trio, Heart Fulla Bluz and Rough Mix filled the afternoon with their own sounds. Around 6 p.m., Notorious Groove, comprised of vocalist Charlie Brown, guitarist Dana Gaynor, bass player Bobby Soul and drummer Frank Zelasney, kicked their one-hour set into gear, and the house was jumping.

Dance, anyone? Everybody was



Al Bivens.



Rough Mix guitarist Glenn Kaucher relaxes in the bosom of the Raven's Nest – an elegantly appointed musicians' lounge – with vocalist Mary Hawkins.



Master guitarist Don Mayer, left, brings a big-band jazz theme to his performance, with help from tenor saxophonist George Kokolis, center, and trumpeter Wayne Dillon.



Melissa Hamburg of Essentials Salon in Doylestown and Suzie Zischang of The Perk in Perkasie show their enjoyment of the blues and its musicians.



The intensity of South Saturn Delta is evident when April Iorio is belting out a tune. The collective audience murmurs, "Wow."

Photographs by Mason Loika

up and grooving. Next, South Saturn Delta, a premier blues band named after a posthumous Jimi Hendrix album, took the crowd to a higher place as vocalist April Iorio wailed a jump tune with a voice whose timbre penetrates the outskirts of the soul.

"Listen to this," offstage musicians in the crowd called out to one another, as they scrambled for seats or standing room. The New Jersey-based band, with guitarist Dave Fecca, bassist Jerry Mayall and drummer Mike NewMiller, featured songs from their self-titled CD and latest offering, "Drink From the Well."

Putting the "snapper to the caper," master guitarist Don Mayer, professionally known as the "Tone Master" for his ability to achieve exceptional tone, led his own band and a host of guest musicians until half an hour before closing time,



Emcee John Ruby and Rob Fraser, bass player from Mike Dugan's band, serve as an impromptu welcoming committee at the Raven's Nest front door.

Easter morning. Blues great Mary Hawkins joined Mayer onstage along with trumpeters and saxophonists. There were so many high points that few people could manage to pull themselves away and go home.

Great music leaves little room for idle chitchat. Nevertheless, Al Bivens, a stone mason by trade, finds time to be the Raven's Nest's number one resident supporter, because he is married to the owner, Rena.

"She does everything." Al says proudly. "She handles the bands, the bookings and management." More than 250 people attended this year's event, and more than a fourth of them were musicians and their loved ones.

Rena and Al Bivens purchased the Raven's Nest 20 years ago after moving here from Woodstock, N.Y. The place was a

natural inspiration to provide entertainment. The stone structure was erected in 1710 and has been licensed to serve food and spirits since 1750. The two-story building reflects the eerie aura of its Edgar Allan Poe namesake by a foreboding sign in the parking lot.

In 1991, the Bivenses became involved with the Lehigh County Blues Network and decided to give the organization a presence in Upper Bucks. "We started our first BluesFest with only three bands," Al said, pointing out the initial event showcased a little-known headliner, Craig Thatcher."

Thatcher has since become a respected blues headliner – he performed at the Stockton Inn Feb. 28. His career reflects a professional admiration of Eric Clapton.

The Raven's Nest is in Haycock Township next to Strawtown, a historic area affectionately known



Dave Fecca plays and backs up the vocals while April Iorio sings.

as "Quakertucky," on Old Bethlehem Road 1.7 miles northwest of its intersection with Mountain View Drive (Pa.-563), west of Lake Nockamixon.

The "Nest," generously adorned with colorful spotlights, is a half mile beyond a one-lane bridge. The Raven's Nest presents live blues entertainment every Friday and Saturday night at 9 p.m. till closing, and Don Mayer hosts an open mike night on Wednesday evenings at 7:30. Newcomers who plan to perform are advised to bring their "A-game."

This joint provides top-notch entertainment in a laid-back environment.