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Byron's bay side bash takes root on the blues beat

By music writer IAIN SHEDDEN

WHEN you talk about the home of the blues there are only a few names that can be quoted with any authority — Mississippi, New Orleans, Chicago, maybe Texas if you stretch the boundaries of the genre. But in the past few years another name has been creeping into the blues vocabulary — Byron Bay.

The line-up for this year's East Coast Blues and Roots Festival, which begins today, is the biggest and best mix of local and overseas acts from the blues/roots tradition assembled in Australia, so much so that the event on the NSW north coast is becoming a mainstay of the international blues calendar.

From what began as a one-off concert for 1500 people at the town's Arts Factory eight years ago, the event has blossomed into a four-day Easter weekend that attracts thousands of visitors from around the country.

This year's line-up includes such US stars as Robert Cray, Steve Earle, Michelle Shocked, Roger McGuinn and Canadian Bruce Cockburn as well as prominent local acts including The Cruel Sea, The Black Sorrows and Chris Wilson.

Many of the overseas artists are, to make it worth their while, touring the country as well.

"The festival was the catalyst (for coming)," says Michelle Shocked, in Sydney on the eve of the festival. "As soon as I was offered the opportunity I contacted the promoter and said 'you want to fly me all the way over here, what do you say (we tour)'."

This will be Shocked's second appearance at the festival and this time she has a band in tow.

"It's my best forum, really," she says of the festival format. "I eat 'em up. I think it's mostly to do with the mood the people are in when they come to a festival. They've already let their guard down. Concerts by comparison let even nightclubs are very formal."

There's an eclecticism in Shocked's music that has made her unpredictable over the years and earned her a hot reputation as a live performer. She believes that this time around Australians will see a bluesy side to her that has been absent during other visits.

"It's not a side of me that's known here so much. In Australia, I've mostly done what I call the Eurocentric, singer-songwriter aspects of my music, but the blues mama that's in me, at festivals just comes out."

Melbourne singer and harmonica player Chris Wilson is making his third appearance at the festival this year and even spent his honeymoon there when he first played four years ago.

"It's an institution," he says of the event, and cites the coastal setting as part of the reason for its success. "It's really attractive to the people that are playing," he says.

"They've always had great line-ups. The common denominator is loosely roots music, but it's been a wide variety of musicians rubbing shoulders which is fantastic."



'Red yesterday 'the festival's my best forum. I eat 'em up. It's mostly to do with the mood the people are in' — Picture: JEREMY PIPER