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A Bull City blues vibe in Central Park

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By Cliff Bellamy

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DURHAM – The 24th Bull Durham Blues Festival returned to a new outdoor venue Saturday, Durham Central Park, and the new location got a rousing endorsement from the crowd that gathered early for the festival, which was free for the first time this year.

“How many folks are really glad that we’re outside again?” asked festival emcee and WCOM FM radio announcer Marc Lee. The reply was an almost immediate “Yeah!” from the audience of blues fans.

“We weren’t sure we were going to be anywhere,” Ed Gomes, a member of the St. Joseph’s Historic Foundation board of directors, told the audience. Gomes was referring to the effects of the slow economy and the slow start St. Joseph’s, which presents the festival, had in planning the festival this year. Gomes said he was happy to see the crowd gathered at the park. “We’re looking forward to doing this next year outdoors” he added.

“I think it’s a great site,” said Sharon Nelson of Durham. Nelson, who writes her own songs and sings a cappella, said she loves attending music festivals.

“I think this is a good venue for it – being outside is great this time of year,” said Chris Weymouth, who said he liked the food trucks and the fact that children could play on the lawn.

Denise Travis and Jeffrey Jones said they liked the closed street, and the emphasis on local musicians. “You’ve got to support the local artists,” Travis said. Travis and Jones said they were attending the festival principally to hear Bobby Hinton play.

“I’m really glad they were able to pull this off,” said Melody Peters, who took note of the number of families who came to the festival. Peters said she would gladly attend another festival at the park.

The festival gates opened at 5 p.m., but even before that time, chairs and blankets already were lined up on the lawn on the Farmers’ Market side of Foster Street. By 6 p.m., festivalgoers began to gather on the Liberty Warehouse side of the park. Foster Street was closed off for the event. When the Harvey Dalton Arnold Blues Band took the stage just before 8 p.m., a hallmark of past festivals returned – dancers gathered on the lawn in front of the stage and moved on the grass. Children and families gathered in The Leaf, the new stage area in the park, and children also played on the lawn in front of the skate park.

The dancing hit full force when Bobby Hinton took the stage with his band. The festival was his first Durham gig in about five years, he said. “Hello, world,”

Hinton said to the crowd. “It’s good to be home.”

Food trucks and vendors were in abundance, among them Papa Mojo’s Roadhouse, Joe’s Diner and Will & Pop’s.

Cellist Shana Tucker was the first performer, and she thanked the festival for accommodating her eclectic style. “I know I’m playing to a tough crowd of blues purists,” Tucker said. She opened with a blues classic from Bessie Smith (“We’re going to channel some Bessie,” Tucker said.) Tucker also performed two originals from her album – “No Get Back” and “Fast Lane,” and ended with an arrangement of Tracy Chapman’s “Fast Car.”

If there were any purists in the audience, they were probably not disappointed when Rick Tobey, the second artist on the bill, took the stage. Tobey gave a solo concert, playing slide guitar and harmonica, singing traditional and original blues in his gravelly, expressive voice.

Lorenzo Quick said he was a fan of the old school – he mentioned Jimmy Reed and Lightnin’ Hopkins – and was ready for some real blues. He grew up listening to the blues in South Carolina. “I love me some blues,” Quick said. “Ain’t nothing like it.”

John Brown’s Groove Shop Band was scheduled to play later in the evening. Before the concert opened, Brown said he was excited about the crowd and the Central Park venue. “It’s an honor to be part of something so established,” Brown said. “I hope the community will come out and support it.”

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