

## **The International Blues Challenge: Before, Then, and Now**

**Zach Glover**

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### **Introduction**

When people feel overwhelming sorrow, oftentimes they feel a need to channel their raw emotion into an expressive outlet. To frame one's suffering in an ordered way and share it with others is deeply therapeutic for both performer and listener, and blues music helps to serve that purpose. The blues is a sort of self-exorcism in which performers can cope with their own personal troubles by relating them to people so that those people can in turn relate with them. It is conveyed through a straightforward musical medium that is as close to being universally comprehensible as music gets, and it is both one of the simplest and most complicated musical genres.

Blues is a genre of vocal and instrumental music that involves the use of "blue notes." It emerged among African-Americans in the southern United States through spirituals, work songs, and field hollers, and it eventually developed into the genre that

brought about jazz, rhythm and blues, and bluegrass. The actual phrase "the blues" is a reference to *blue devils*, or "down" spirits, depression, and sorrow.

Although no single African musical form can be traced back and identified as the single direct ancestor of the blues,<sup>1</sup> both blue notes and the call-and-response technique associated with the blues can be traced back to Africa, and certain instruments common to blues music are also of African origin. The Diddley bow, a makeshift one-stringed instrument, and the banjo are examples of African-derived instruments that may have helped in the transition of African performance techniques into the earlier forms of blues music.

The twelve-bar blues form is the standard form for most blues compositions. It is typically comprised of three chords played over a twelve-bar scheme. A typical format would be a I7 harmony for four measures followed by a IV7 chord for two measures, then back to the I7 for two measures, then a V7, a IV7, a I7, and back to the V7, each for one measure (see **Figure A**).

**Figure A: A typical twelve bar blues form**

{ 4 bars } { 4 bars } { 4 bars } = 12 bars

I7 | ---- | ---- | ---- | IV7 | ---- | I7 | ---- | V7 | IV7 | I7 | V7 |

There were and are, of course, exceptions to this format. In addition to the basic twelve-bar form. An 8-bar form was favored in certain early blues compositions, and later, other

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<sup>1</sup> The Curious Listener's Guide to the Blues. Barbara Vierwo, Andy Trudeau. Stone Press ISBN 0-399-53072-X page 15

forms such as the sixteen-bar blues exemplified in Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man" began to become popular.

Melodically, the blues is built around a major scale with flatted third, fifth, and seventh degrees. This altered scale is referred to as a "blues scale." However, the flatted notes in this scale are not what we refer to as "blue notes." Rather, "blue notes" occur at pitches that do not actually exist on a piano. They occupy a kind of "in between" pitch that would fall somewhere between the piano keys, and for this reason, "crushing" (playing adjacent keys simultaneously) and "sliding" (a similar technique to using grace notes) are often employed to create a kind of "blue note" illusion. Blue notes are easier to accomplish with guitars and certain wind instruments whose notes can simply be bent to reach the "blue notes."

W.C. Handy's wildly popular "St. Louis Blues" was first published in 1912. Handy is widely believed to have been the first person to notate "blue notes" in sheet music, and although his music represents more of a hybrid of blues and ragtime than traditional roots blues, he billed himself as and has come to be known as "the father of the blues." Founding executive director of the Blues Foundation, Joe Savarin remarks,

"If it wouldn't have been for the one man I honored... W.C. Handy... I dunno who named him the father of the blues, but it matters not. The point was that he created, and did take the blues to a new point in his day... many composers began to use the blue note. If it wouldn't have been for Handy, it wouldn't have gone further than the south. He took the blues and created his compositions in such a way that they became world renowned in a day that was tough getting the word out, but he got it. He put it out."<sup>2</sup>

By 1920, blues music recordings could typically be grouped into two categories: a rural style country blues and a more polished urban or city blues. In Memphis, a distinctive rural style emerged through the influence of jug bands and performers such as

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<sup>2</sup> Joe Savarin. May 30, 2008.

Frank Stokes, Robert Wilkins, and Joe McCoy who used a variety of unusual instruments in performance such as washboards and kazoos. In more urban areas, however, another kind of blues called “big band blues” had begun to catch on. Big band blues was more elaborate and orchestrated than rural blues and often featured 12-bar instrumental numbers as opposed to sung call-and response style songs. Boogie-woogie and jump-blues arose out of big band blues, and in turn, jump-blues influenced rhythm and blues and modern-day rock ‘n’ roll.

After World War II, electric blues became popular in many big cities. Chicago was an especially thriving center for delta-influenced electric blues as Mississippi musicians Howlin’ Wolf, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, and Jimmy Reed all moved to Chicago during the Great Migration. Other electric blues centers included Detroit and St. Louis.

In the years that followed, blues began finding its way into more mainstream music. Bands began to emulate blues legends, and in the 1960’s, British blues-rock fusion bands such as Fleetwood Mac, The Rolling Stones, The Yardbirds, Cream, and Led Zeppelin consistently released blues-based hits that topped both American and European charts. In fact, many of Led Zeppelin’s early hits were reworked versions of traditional blues songs, and during the psychedelic movement of the late 1960’s, bands such as The Doors, Country Joe and the Fish, and Jimi Hendrix used blues structure as the basis for some of their wildest musical experiments.

Even today, blues music’s influence runs deep. Young artists such as The White Stripes, The Raconteurs, The Von Bondies, Dax Riggs, and The North Mississippi Allstars build much of their material off of blues formats. Nowadays, however, each of

these bands has been pigeon-holed into rock sub-genres such as “indie rock” and “British revival” and as a result, the blues genre as it exists in its purest form has suffered.

However, there has in very recent years been a resurgence of interest in blues music, brought on in large part by national festivals and events designed to promote and develop the blues as an art form. Of these festivals, perhaps the most prestigious is Memphis Tennessee’s International Blues Challenge.

The International Blues Challenge (IBC) is an annual competition in which unsigned blues artists from around the world come to Memphis, Tennessee to compete for recording contracts, money, and the title of best blues band, soloist, or duo of the year. It is advertised as the largest yearly gathering of blues artists in the world. Although the IBC will be celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in early 2009, there has been very little past documentation pertaining to the history of the contest, so for this reason, this essay will attempt to compile and document key elements of the contest’s history including its past winners and award recipients, award packages, venues, etc.

### **IBC History: Research Findings**

According to an article in Memphis’s *Downtowner* Magazine, the competition was started in 1985<sup>3</sup> (this differs from the Blues Foundation’s website information which indicates that the contest was started a year earlier in 1984) as a non-profit event with no awards apart from permission to perform in Handy Park. Today, performers compete for such prizes as a \$1000 award, recording time, free CD production, and paying appearances at several blues festivals and events around the country.

The Blues Foundation has over 160 affiliated societies around the world, and it is these affiliates that determine the entrants to the competition. The affiliates sponsor

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell, Steven. 2007. Battle of the Blues. *Downtowner*. July.

dozens of “battle of the bands” competitions in their respective regions, the winners of which are matched in head-to-head juried competition for the chance to take their band, solo act, or duo to the national stage with great performance opportunities, cash, and prizes. This process together with each contestant’s knowledge that placing at the IBC could change their lives ensures that the IBC receives nothing but the best available talent.

The Blues Foundation is similar in most aspects to its many affiliates. It is a nonprofit corporation headquartered in Memphis, Tennessee devoted to preserving Blues history, celebrating Blues excellence, supporting Blues education, and ensuring the future of a uniquely American art form. What sets the Blues Foundation apart is that it “serves as the hub for the worldwide passion for Blues Music.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, while all of the Blues Foundation’s affiliates are similarly devoted to preservation of the blues, the Blues Foundation is not regionally concentrated: it boasts a global membership. One might look at it as the FedEx of blues music.

Today, the International Blues Challenge is a \$1.6 million boost to Memphis’s economy, and its current executive director, Jay Sieleman was quoted saying, “It’s the Blues Foundation that puts some currency into the home of the blues.” However, the IBC has not always been the financial boon that it is today. When Joe Savarin started the competition in 1984, he did so with the understanding that he would not be able to offer any substantial prizes to the winners. Savarin remarks, “We didn’t have any big prizes or anything, but when we put the word out to the societies, there was no problem. They were funding or sponsoring acts from their town and what have you, and boy, they

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<sup>4</sup> Blues Foundation homepage. [www.blues.org](http://www.blues.org).

come... from all over.”<sup>5</sup> As it turns out, the bands that came to perform were perfectly content to compete for free as long as they were allowed to hold jam sessions in Handy Park in their free time. Savarin recalls, “They weren’t so much interested in the prize or anything like that, but they were on Beale Street.”<sup>6</sup>

In the years that followed, national blues societies became increasingly enthusiastic about the competition, but to the general public, the event remained virtually unknown. However, widespread public reception was not a primary goal of the competition early on. It was most of all an opportunity for great blues acts that might never have had the chance to perform in the home of the blues to get together and play with each other.

To understand the competition’s humble beginnings, it helps to understand the reason Joe Savarin started the Blues Foundation in the first place. When Savarin was in the Air Force, he received word that he was to be stationed in Greenville, Mississippi. Savarin recalls,

The first thing that happened to me was that I was invited... to see, firsthand, how some of these black people lived... And so I visited this dear old lady. She’s sitting there, in this little room... And there were cracks in the wall—you could see outdoors. And children (grandchildren) were running back and forth. And she’s just having a good time and a great day, and she says “oh I have been so blessed!” And I hear these words. She had been so blessed! And here were cracks in the walls—in the winter time they’ve got to be freezing! You know, and I say, “My God, what have I run into!” And the more I thought about it... when I got home, that night I was in tears, but... I said “boy is this special or what?”

After having lived in Greenville for a few months and after having listened to local bluesmen talk and perform, Savarin began to understand what the blues was about. The empowerment that bluesmen drew from personal hardship struck a chord with him, and

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<sup>5</sup> Savarin.

<sup>6</sup> Savarin.

as he thought about it, he started to compare their situations to that of the woman he had met, and soon he began to realize that what he had felt on his visit to the woman's house was the essence of the blues:

I would listen to them and how they spoke, and I was thinking of this lady all along. And I said "goddamn, that's blues." Not that it would turn a lot of people on, but it was unique. I mean how often is a white person gonna see this. That always stayed with me in my mind, and I said "if one day I can do something, I will."

As soon as he came to this conclusion, he started organizing blues talent shows on the Air Force base. After he left the service and moved to Memphis, in much the same fashion, Savarin continued to organize blues performances, primarily in Handy Park. Savarin remarks, "It's nothing I really created. I just had a feeling for it... And I said, 'my God, anyone who comes in and wants to play in Handy Park is going to play in Handy Park. Good, bad, whatever, that's what's going to happen.' And man we had some great sessions there."

So as a labor of love, Savarin started the Blues Foundation in 1980 and began a movement in Memphis that brought about the revival of blues performance in the south. In its early days, the Blues Foundation was nothing more than a roadside merchandise stand on Beale Street with a sign that read "Help Keep the Blues Alive." From the roadside operation's meager earnings along with donations and volunteer workers, Savarin organized the 1980 National Blues Music Awards Show in an attempt to promote Memphis as the home of the blues by honoring the nation's greatest blues musicians. In a *Commercial Appeal* article, it was reported that although the show was casual and informal that it could still be counted as a "flawed success."<sup>7</sup> It went on to say, however,

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<sup>7</sup> James Shearin, "Blues Awards Showed Weak Points, But Laid Base for Boosting Heritage," *The Commercial Appeal*, November 18, 1980.

that there was “too much emphasis in the entertainment on a refined, city blues,” an assertion that was supported by the Blues Foundation’s choosing the jump-blues number, “Swinging’ Down in Memphis Town” as its theme song. This opinion was apparently a point of contention between blues fans as Bill Burk of the *Memphis Press Scimitar* once praised the song’s performer, Tommy Ruble with the statement,

I have seen Tommy sing softly and make women cry. I have seen Tommy sing upbeat and fill dance floors. I have seen Tommy sing inspirationally and cause whole crowds to become silent. And now I have heard Tommy sing, “Swinging Down in Memphis Town” and it makes me damned proud that I am a Memphian.<sup>8</sup>

However, the song did not last long as the Blues Foundation’s anthem, and Savarin seemed to take to heart the notion that he had been placing too much emphasis on big city blues. As time went by, Savarin began to realize that many rural, grassroots musicians who played in Handy Park on occasion but had never made a name for themselves should be recognized as well. So it was for this purpose that Joe Savarin organized the first Blues Amateur Talent Contest in 1984. The event would go on to become what we now know as the International Blues Challenge, but in its early years, it was a fairly laid-back amateur showcase held at the New Daisy Theatre in conjunction with a live performance series called the Beale Street Rambles. A handout for one of the earliest contests advertised, “*In the Memphis Tradition...* The Blues Foundation presents The Beale Street Rambles and Amateur Showcase.”<sup>9</sup> Today, the IBC is a well-oiled competition boasting more than 160 acts and world-wide patronage. Participation has become increasingly competitive recently as blues societies have begun to discover that a good reception of a band from their region means positive publicity for their town or region as a legitimate producer of high quality blues music.

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<sup>8</sup> Bill Burk, promotional letter for “Swinging Down in Memphis Town”

<sup>9</sup> The Blues Foundation, promotional add.

Information on the contest during the mid-to-late eighties is fairly sparse. Since back then, the contest was so much less of a tourist attraction (especially compared to today's standards), there was less reason to advertise and seek press coverage. In the contest's early years, admission was free, and contestants competed more for notoriety than for money or advancement of their music careers. Joe Savarin mentions in an interview that he actually no longer has possession of files that would provide insight into the workings of the first years of the event:

I'm going to give you the name and phone number of a Musician. He's a railroad man from Memphis, and I turned over all of my files to him. And he has background, so it may be that in the scrapbooks, there may be some useful information. And the reason I gave all this information to this fella, whose number I'm going to give you, is that he's a dedicated person, to art...<sup>10</sup>

What information was recovered pertained little to the International Blues Challenge, but it did provide some valuable insight into the Blues Foundation's early years. Also, due to a lack of information on the Blues Foundation's website, there have recently been suspicions that no competition was held in 1990 and 1991, but these gaps have recently been filled in, and it has been determined that the contest did indeed occur in these years. In fact, in a 1990 *Commercial Appeal* article, then Blues Foundation president, David Simmons, was quoted as saying, "I think this is the smoothest show that we've ever had... The overall quality of the acts was much better, and there were more good at-large acts this year."<sup>11</sup> The winners of the 1990 competition, a band from Bloomington, Indiana called The Dynamics, beat out 34 competitors and received \$500, the Lucille Award, a Malaco Records recording package, and a performance slot at the Handy Awards. *The Commercial Appeal* article goes on to say,

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<sup>10</sup> Savarin.

<sup>11</sup> Ron Wynn, "Indiana band takes award in smoothly run blues show." *The Commercial Appeal*, September 3, C1, 1990.

Simmons said the Blues Foundation was considering having next year's competitions taped and edited into a television special. He said that there would not be any changes in the format, but that the foundation would try to attract a national sponsor for next year's event and that the foundation would also try to add some prizes to the winner's package. This year's show had no problems with sound, lighting or pacing.<sup>12</sup>

1993 was a year of considerable change for the competition. It was in this year that the Albert King award for the year's most promising blues guitarist was created. The award has been given each year since then and has been received by such recently-successful recording artists as Tyree Neal, Slick Ballinger, and Sean Carney. 1993 was also witness to an amendment to the contest's rules. Before then, to ensure that no seasoned blues veterans bested the competition, entrants were limited to those who made less than fifty percent of their annual income performing blues music. This rule was dropped in 1993 to guarantee that the competition drew the best available talent.

Prior to 1994, the official name of the contest had been The National Blues Amateur Talent Competition, but in '94 "Amateur" was dropped from the name of the event to suggest "a change in the qualifying requirements and boast a high caliber of talent."<sup>13</sup> Also in 1994, for the first time, the recipient of the Albert King award for most promising blues guitarist would not receive one of King's signature Flying V guitars, but instead would be awarded a Gibson Blues King acoustic/electric guitar that was on display at the W.C. Handy House.<sup>14</sup> An affiliation with Helena, Arkansas's *King Biscuit Blues Festival* was also initiated: "The preliminaries will be held on Oct. 8 at the Sonny Boy Blues Society Headquarters during the *King Biscuit Blues Festival* in Helena, Ark.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> International Blues Challenge Homepage, Blues Foundation, <http://www.blues.org/ibc/past.php4>

<sup>14</sup> Larry Nager, "Marketing the Delta blues focus of conference in Nov." *The Commercial Appeal*, July 30, 1994.

The finals will take place Oct. 9 at the New Daisy Theatre, 330 Beale.”<sup>15</sup> David Less explained the reason for the move in a *Commercial Appeal* interview: “Helena attracts blues fans and industry people from all over the world and we felt that we could attract better participation.”<sup>16</sup> Admission to the Memphis finals was set at \$3 (this included a post-contest jam session).

1995 was the year that marked the switch from national to international. The newly named 12<sup>th</sup> Annual International Blues Talent Competition (IBTC) was held in both Helena, AR and Memphis, TN and “drew 25 blues acts to compete at the New Daisy, narrowed down by the foundation’s affiliated blues societies from a field of 500 preliminary entrants.”<sup>17</sup> A particularly noteworthy event of this year was that for the first time in the contest’s history, the Albert King award was presented to a non-American performer, Geoff Achison of the Melbourne Blues Appreciation Society. The 1996 IBTC was held on Oct. 12, also in both Helena and Memphis, and featured surprise guest appearances by The Memphis Horns, Wayne Jackson, and Andrew Love.

By 1997, the competition had experienced substantial growth. Several featured artists such as Michelle “Evil Gal” Willson, Susan Tedeschi, The Hardway Connection, and The Racky Thomas Band have since gone on to sign recording contracts, but even in 1997, the contest was still “undiscovered.” Few who were not serious blues enthusiasts were aware of it, and the event’s pull was limited mostly to members of national societies, blues insiders, and followers of specific competing bands.’97 was the second

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Nager, “Big names grace blues talent show.” *The Commercial Appeal*, October 1, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Nager, “Blues Foundation plans big Dec. fund-raiser in L.A.” *The Commercial Appeal*, October 14, 1995.

year that the competition would be held in conjunction with Bluestock, a festival that would provide networking opportunities for struggling blues bands.

In 1998, the festival was held entirely in Memphis in multiple clubs on Beale Street (Alfred's, The Black Diamond, and The Hard Rock Café), and was scheduled so that it would not coincide with that year's Bluestock. Blues Foundation executive director, Howard Stovall apparently "felt the amateur contest, supposedly a festival spotlight, got lost in the flurry of activity."<sup>18</sup> In '98, the 36 artists [competed] for a "\$20,000 jackpot, which [gave] the top winner \$1,000 cash, 20 hours of recording time at Ardent, 1,000 CDs and more than a dozen gigs nationally in clubs, festivals and events such as the W.C. Handy Blues Awards."<sup>19</sup> Third place finishers were awarded \$250, and in a jam session that mirrored Savarin's Handy Park sessions, twelve bands played warm-up sets outdoors on Beale Street. Claiming top honors this year was Abe Reid, "a North Carolinian who wowed the judges with a mix of Piedmont blues and Squirrel Nut Zippers-styled stage hokum."<sup>20</sup>

No competition was held in 1999 because of a decision to switch the date from October to January, but in 2000, the number of entrants jumped from 34 to 54. Awards were improved as a free web page design from 305 Spin was added to the winner's prize package of \$1000, recording time at Ardent, and 1,000 free CD's. The Price of wristbands for all-club entry was set at \$12 and an additional \$10 for the Saturday finals at the New Daisy Theatre. But the most significant change that occurred in 2000 was that the Blues Foundation redubbed the contest the International Blues Challenge (the name that is still in use today). Furthermore, executive director Howard Stovall decided

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<sup>18</sup> Bill Ellis, "Sophomore jinx gets to Bluestock this year." *The Commercial Appeal*, October 17, 1998. C1.

<sup>19</sup> Ellis, "Contest gives bluesmen a return on their dues." *The Commercial Appeal*, October 23, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Ellis, "Bluesman from N.C. wins IBTC competition." *The Commercial Appeal*, October 26, 1998. A5.

he wanted to lend distinction to the talent contest separate from the foundation's other events, namely the W.C. Handy Blues Awards in May. Consequently, the International Blues Challenge [became] part of a larger industry/awards celebration the Blues Foundation [called] BluesFirst Convention Weekend.<sup>21</sup>

Admission to BluesFirst was set at \$125 for both days, and the festival included a series of seminars for blues societies and performers in which registrants could get information about archival research, writing grants, internet networking, etc. Also part of BluesFirst was the annual "Keeping the Blues Alive awards and brunch, held in the past during Handy week."<sup>22</sup> For the IBC itself, more than 50 blues societies sent in their respective winners to compete in the semifinals. Howard Stovall explains, "We say this competition is a two-day event... Well, it's not. It runs for months and months all across the United States. What we see here is the very end of it – 53 of the best, emerging blues artists in the country."<sup>23</sup> The clubs used for the 2000 semi-finals included Blues Hall, The Rum Boogie Café, The Black Diamond, The Hard Rock Café, Elvis Presley's Memphis, Blues City Café, King's Palace Café, and the New Daisy Theatre.

In 2001, for the second year in a row, the number of featured acts performing in the IBC was 53, and regions as far and wide as Australia, Austria, Maine, and California were represented. Howard Stovall comments,

The quality of talent has gotten so much better... At first it was kind of, oh, let's get a blues society together and send a band to Memphis and we'll have a good time. Then when the prize package evolved to include studio time, CD time and all the club and festival dates, all of a sudden you've got a very good way for a band to get a start. And once information started percolating out, we got a lot of new people interested in competing. And the level of talent... has just

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<sup>21</sup> Ellis, "International Blues Contest attracts 53 emerging artists." *The Commercial Appeal*, January 21, 2000. Cover Story.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

skyrocketed. Now, by the time you hit the finals of the IBC, you're going to hear really good bands.<sup>24</sup>

From the 53 entrants, eight finalists would be chosen from the semis to advance to the main event at the New Daisy (by this time, 105 affiliated organizations from 24 countries were sending in entrants). 2001 also marked the first year that a native Memphian walked away with first place honors. The *Commercial Appeal* reported:

Richard Johnston... beat out more than 50 acts to win the Blues Foundation's 17<sup>th</sup> annual International Blues Challenge (IBC) on Feb. 3... Johnston – who represented Memphis as the winner of the Beale Street Blues Society talent contest... even picked up the Albert King Award and its prize, a Gibson Flying V, for most promising blues guitarist. Johnston is further nominated in the coming Premier Player Awards in the Newcomer category and will perform there as well as on April 5 at The Pyramid.<sup>25</sup>

In 2001, the competition was again held in conjunction with BluesFirst, and registrants could participate in such seminars as “Building a Better Bluesletter” and “Blues Radio – Challenges and Opportunities.” Admission to the IBC was \$10 per night. Scott Bjoko remarked of the 2001 year, “BluesFirst and the International Blues Challenge have developed into must-do Blues events. It's become a uniquely rich Blues weekend when fans, up-and-coming artists, press, and recording industry come together to learn, lead, discuss, make, and listen to all things Blues.”

In 2002's 18<sup>th</sup> Annual IBC, for the third year in a row, 53 acts were entered in the contest. The Detroit group, Chef Chris & his Nairobi Trio took top honors in the group division while Long Island resident, Little Toby Walker, won the solo award. Taking second place was the Tyree Neal band from Baton Rouge, LA, and the third place award

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<sup>24</sup> Ellis, “Blues can strike anywhere, international contest proves.” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 2, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> “Blues Challenge,” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 17, 2001.

went to The Nicole Nelson Band from Boston. Tyree Neal also won the Albert King Award.

An interesting turn of events for the Blues Foundation came in the summer of 2002 as five-year executive director, Howard Stovall, abruptly resigned as he wished to “concentrate on other business opportunities.”<sup>26</sup> Blues Foundation advisory board member, Bruce Iglauer (who runs Alligator Records) remarked, “Howard did a great deal to make the Handys more visible, including getting them on a lot of public television stations, (and) he made BluesFirst into a much more viable and nationally recognized event.”<sup>27</sup> Stovall’s sudden resignation came as a shock to the Blues Foundation, and in the following months, the future of the Blues Foundation in Memphis seemed uncertain. In a June *Commercial Appeal* article, Bill Ellis writes, “It’ll be tough finding one person to fill all those shoes. But it can be done. The danger during this interim period would be that in-house pettiness and short-term thinking squander what the foundation has built, especially in the last decade under Stovall...”<sup>28</sup> Further troubling was the fact that “blues, already a niche market, [had] experienced dwindling sales as [had] most genres in a music industry faced with free downloading and other pertinent issues.”<sup>29</sup>

On top of all of this, the Blues Foundation was also experiencing a whopping financial deficit. So, taking all of this into account, the Blues Foundation began considering switching the location of its headquarters to a place that would garner more national recognition: “Straddled with a deficit around \$90,000, the Memphis-based nonprofit has been so hampered by financial woes, it has entertained moving to another

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<sup>26</sup> Ellis, “Stovall resigns as director of Blues Foundation,” *The Commercial Appeal*, June 26, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Ellis, “It’ll take someone special to fill blues vacancy,” *The Commercial Appeal*, June 29, 2002

<sup>29</sup> Ellis, “Handys need help to weather the storm,” *The Commercial Appeal*, September 21, 2002

city, among them Baton Rouge, LA.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, the preferred alternative was still to remain in Memphis, find a new executive director, and begin to eradicate its debts. Kevin Kane, the Blues Foundation’s board president remarked, “I don’t think we’re going anywhere... It would have to be something incredible for us... We’ve got so much to do that we’ve got to focus on the obvious opportunities. And right now, the obvious opportunities exist in Memphis.”<sup>31</sup> Inaction on the part of Baton Rouge further convinced Kane that it might not be a perfect fit for the BF. Kane remarks, “They haven’t responded, and this was a month ago... Our plate is real full right now just trying to get the organization stabilized... Memphis is stepping up, and if Louisiana is going to do something, they’d better do it sooner than later.”<sup>32</sup> Finally, one of the last straws that eventually led to the Blues Foundation’s decision not to switch location was that the J.R. Hyde III Family Foundation donated \$50,000 to the organization but under a specific condition: “The Hyde award... stipulates that if the Blues Foundation leaves town in the next year, it would have to pay the money back.” So at this point, still located in Memphis, the Blues Foundation continued preparations for its 2003 International Blues Challenge, scheduled for Jan. 30-Feb. 2 on Beale Street.

70 acts competed in the 2003 competition, and societies with competing entrants ranged from Singapore to Melbourne. The contest was again held in conjunction with the BluesFirst Convention and Expo. The semifinals were held on Beale Street, with the finals in the New Daisy Theatre. Semifinals and finals tickets were \$10 apiece. Placing

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<sup>30</sup> Ellis, “Blues Foundation forges ahead amid doubts about its future in Memphis,” *The Commercial Appeal*, December 29, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

first was Delta Moon, an act from Atlanta that avoided 12-bar structure and featured “not one but two slide guitarists including former Brains member Tom Gray.”<sup>33</sup>

In 2003, the Blues Foundation hired Jay Sieleman as executive director, and in November of that year, an article was published in the *Commercial Appeal* entitled, “Blues Foundation singing of stability, fiscal harmony.” In it, Sieleman is reported to have reduced the Foundation’s debt from \$90,000 to \$60,000 in less than a year. It goes on to say that “by year’s end... monthly expenses will be \$14,000 – about half of what they were in March – after staff reductions of 50 percent and an examination of every expense from long-distance phone calls to utilities.”<sup>34</sup>

In 2004 the contest was billed as the “largest gathering of blues bands in the history of the world.” A short sentence in a January edition of the *Commercial Appeal* read simply, “Jan. 28-31: 20<sup>th</sup> International Blues Challenge. 96 blues acts on Beale Street. Details: 527-2583.”<sup>35</sup> In a longer write-up a few days later, Bill Ellis writes,

With nearly 100 competing acts, from Australia to the Republic of Georgia, this contest is the biggest yet... contest chair Betsie Brown... calls it ‘the largest gathering of blues acts in the history of the world’ and expects more than 1000 people to visit Memphis for the contest and its slate of related events. The IBC is also the central activity of BluesFirst, a weekend of panels, networking, and jamming for registrants...<sup>36</sup>

In an interview, Assaf Ganzman, leader of the Israeli group, SOBO was quoted as saying, “Just to be in Memphis where the blues is from in part is an honor for us. To represent our country in such a high-profile competition is something we’ve always dreamed of

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<sup>33</sup> Ellis, “Live” (review), *The Commercial Appeal*, September 13, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> David Williams, “Blues Foundation singing of stability, fiscal harmony,” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 13, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> *The Commercial Appeal*, January 9, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Ellis, “Blues lovers from ‘round world enjoy challenge,” *The Commercial Appeal*, January 23, 2004.

doing.”<sup>37</sup> The winner of the solo/duo category was Lightnin’ Lee and the Upright Rooster, an acoustic act from Hot Springs, AR. Their awards included “\$500 cash, studio time, Web site design, CD production and numerous gig bookings.”<sup>38</sup> Winners of the group finals were to be announced after press time, so a day passed before it was announced to the public that Los Angeles group, Zac Harmon & Midsouth Blues Revue, took first place. The band “won \$1000 plus numerous professional perks including recording time, airplay, booking and publicity consultation, web site design, CD production, and plenty of gig opportunities, notably a spot on the April 29 W.C. Handy Blues awards.”<sup>39</sup> Second place and a \$500 check went to Como, MS guitarist, Daniel “Slick” Ballinger’s band, Rev. Slick & the Soul Blues Boyz. Ballinger also took home the Albert King Award for most promising blues guitarist. Third place in the contest and \$250 went to Boston jump-blues band, the Matthew Stubbs Band.

Later in 2004, a *Commercial Appeal* article was published in which David Williams reported concerning the Blues Foundation’s debt issues, “Director of administration Jay Sieleman said the only remaining debt is to First Tennessee, which is owed about \$15,000 and is receiving monthly payments scheduled to end in June 2006.”<sup>40</sup>

The dates of the 2005 IBC were pushed back a couple of days to Feb. 3-5. In a 2005 article, Yolanda Jones writes, “The IBC is like the Super Bowl for amateur blues musicians, who not only get to be seen and heard outside of their hometowns but have a

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<sup>37</sup> Ellis, “Blues lovers from ‘round the world enjoy challenge,” *The Commercial Appeal*, January 23, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Ellis, “A world of blues – Music transcends nationalities at best-ever contest.” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 1, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Ellis, “Zac Harmon & Midsouth Blues Revue top winner,” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 2, 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, “Blues group finds footing – Foundation fixes financial problems, returns to its mission,” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 25, 2004.

chance at winning \$25,000 in prizes...<sup>41</sup> 126 acts performed at the 2005 contest and such countries as Hungary, Australia, and Taiwan were represented. Another Israeli group, CG & The Hammer, competed in the IBC in 2005 who were nominated by the Israeli-based Blues for Peace organization, the same group that nominated SOBO to perform a year prior. When asked why they play blues to audiences in Tel Aviv who have never heard as much as a single blue note, Hammer, CG's singer and harmonica player, replied, "It doesn't matter. Blues can be understood no matter who you are, and that is why we love this music."<sup>42</sup>

In the solo/duo division, first place went to Jimmy Hocking. In the group division, first place went to Diunna Greenleaf & Blue Mercy. Second went to Lady X & the Sunshine Band, and third went to the Teeny Tucker Band. The recipient of the Albert King Award for most promising blues guitarist was Jonn Richardson of Blue Mercy.

The stellar competitor turnout of 126 entrants in 2005 seemed a difficult number to top, but 2006, in a January edition of the *Commercial Appeal* a brief write-up announced, "Jan. 26-27: The Blues Foundation's 22<sup>nd</sup> International Blues Challenge. 130 bands compete on Beale Street."<sup>43</sup> In an article later that month, Yolanda Jones writes,

Jay Sieleman, executive director of the Memphis-based Blues Foundation, which has produced the competition for two decades, said the incentive of working gigs, including at major festivals such as the Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise, is one reason the competition has its largest number of competing acts this year.<sup>44</sup>

Marco Pandolfi, frontman of the Italian band, Marco Pandolfi & The Jacknives claimed that he and his band strove to retain an old-school flair in their music: "Robert Johnson

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<sup>41</sup> Yolanda Jones, "A Super Bowl for the blues – 126 acts are gonna get their mojo workin' Feb. 3-5 Downtown," *The Commercial Appeal*, January 28, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> "Plan Ahead – Upcoming entertainment in the Memphis area," *The Commercial Appeal*, January 6, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, "Blues all over – Here comes the International Challenge to Downtown Memphis; would you like some Italian with that?" *The Commercial Appeal*, January 20, 2006.

and Muddy Waters, to name a couple, are what Pandolfi calls ‘the powerful low-down-and-dirty sound of the blues’ that sucked him in as a boy and hasn’t let him go since.”<sup>45</sup>

Pandolfi, a nominee of the Roots ‘n Blues Association in Parma, goes on to say,

We are so proud and excited, because this is the first time Italy has been represented in this event... To quote the great Little Toby Walker, he really convinced me that the harmonica was a great instrument and the blues the right way to express my feeling... It is music that just touches my soul.<sup>46</sup>

The 2006 competition opened on a Tuesday with a “Pre-IBC Jam at Ground Zero in Clarksdale, Miss. Open to local, regional, national and international performers coming in for the IBC.”<sup>47</sup> Two days later, the IBC semifinals officially began. Wristbands were sold on Beale Street at \$10 per night, and spectators were given access to 16 venues. Clubs where finalists were announced included B.B. King’s, Celebrity’s, Hard Rock Café, Mr. Handy’s Blues Hall, King’s Palace, The New Daisy Theatre, Pat O’Brien’s, Pig on Beale, Rom Boogie Café, The Tap Room, and Wet Willies.<sup>48</sup> The finals were held on Saturday with the solo/duo division from 2-5 p.m. at the Center for Southern Folklore at 119 S. Main and the band finals at the New Daisy at 8 p.m. (sound check at the New Daisy was scheduled for 1:30 p.m.) Finally, after the finals, the winner of the band division, which turned out to be Joey Gilmore and his band (nominated by the South Florida Blues Society), played a victory concert at the Pig on Beale.”<sup>49</sup> Top honors in solo/duo went to Eden Brent of the Mississippi Delta Blues Society. Interestingly, there had been complications for Gilmore in 2005 as he and his quartet “were declared the winners, but were later disqualified because an earlier album had been distributed

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

nationally – a violation of contest rules.”<sup>50</sup> However, in 2006, the rules were amended such that Gilmore was able to compete: “Gilmore and his band claimed the \$1,500 award along with other prizes – web site design, recording time, instruments and equipment and gigs such as the Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise.”<sup>51</sup> Eden Brent references overcoming a technical malfunction in her acceptance speech: ““They talk about the thrill being gone, but it just started for me... I knew I had to go on with the show when that keyboard died. I just did what I had to do.’ To a standing-room crowd, Brent, 40, banged out the blues on a piano in the corner and got a standing ovation.”<sup>52</sup> Frutelard Jackson, one of the IBC judges noted, “It was a combination of her whisky-soaked voice, her solid piano playing and the fact that she didn’t whine when there was a problem made her a winner for all of us... She got the job done. She was a trouper.”<sup>53</sup> A San Diego sextet called Aunt Kizzy’z Boyz took second place, and Jill West and Blues Attack from Pittsburgh took third.

Though the IBC seemed to be approaching its best times by 2006, press coverage for the event could have been better. In a letter to the editor in the *Commercial Appeal* entitled “To visitor, blues coverage was lacking,” a Missouri native reported,

I spent last weekend in your fair city, attending the International Blues Challenge, and was surprised to find little print coverage of this annual event. Being from out of town, I searched your newspaper on Friday, Saturday and Sunday for some blues information, Little did I find, and I wondered: Has the celebration reached its zenith? To recognize blues artists from around the world requires a tremendous amount of effort. Although I was only a weekend guest, I wanted to read, for example some of the particulars about the gala production. There are many cities, such as St. Louis, Kansas City and Chicago, that would love to host such a show.

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<sup>50</sup> Jones, “Blues for the people – Community gathers from 7 nations, 33 states for Challenge,” *The Commercial Appeal*, January 30, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid..

It seems the local newspaper would want to capture and promote such an artistic moment.<sup>54</sup>

But regardless, it did not appear that the Blues Foundation was any the worse off. In September of 2006, a *Commercial Appeal* article entitled “Foundation sings happy blues tunes,” it was reported, “The blues can be happy music too. So it is for the Blues Foundation, whose plans for the 2007 International Blues Challenge include moving the band finals to the Orpheum.”<sup>55</sup> This move was important because the previous location, The New Daisy, was too small to accommodate the number of people that wanted to attend the contest. The Orpheum, however had more than enough space and as a venue, projected a contest of a much grander scale. The same *Commercial Appeal* article reports, “The foundation has regained its financial footing in recent years, to the point of being nominated for a Stanford Group Financial Excellence Award for its fiscal stewardship.”<sup>56</sup> It goes on to say, “Membership has increased by 45 percent, including more than 200 blues musicians as members. The number of affiliated organizations has doubled to 150. The size of the International Blues Challenge also has doubled, with 130 participating acts.”<sup>57</sup> Jay Sieleman remarked, “Most things are as good as they’ve been for a while.”

In January of 2007, a *Commercial Appeal* advertisement read,

Feb. 1-3: The Blues Foundation’s 23<sup>rd</sup> International Blues Challenge. 150 bands and solo acts compete. Semifinals in Beale Street clubs Feb. 1 (\$10) and Feb. 2 (\$15) at 5 p.m. Band finals at the Orpheum Feb. 3 at 2 p.m. Solo finals at New Daisy Theater Feb. 3 at 8:30 p.m. Finals tickets/more information online...<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Dave Dickerson, Letter to the editor, “To visitor, blues coverage was lacking,” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 3, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> “Foundation sings happy blues tunes,” *The Commercial Appeal*, September 15, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> “Plan ahead – Upcoming entertainment in the Memphis area,” *The Commercial Appeal*, January 12, 2007.

Incredibly, the number of entrants had again been raised, this time by twenty-seven entrants (the number was not 150 as predicted but rather 157). Ticket prices had gone up as well, as admission to the second night's shows was now \$15 rather than \$10.

The Stayers, who represented the Sydney Blues Society, were one of the overseas entrants in the 2007 competition. Andrew Yabsley, a high school science teacher and singer for the Stayers comments, "This is like a pilgrimage for us to come to the home of the blues... We've been playing the blues a long time, and to come here where it was all born is just a thrill."<sup>59</sup> A major difference this year was the increased participation in the solo/duo category: "That part of the competition has had the biggest growth," Sieleman says of the solo/duo contest. "It wasn't that long ago when we had maybe 10 acts competing. But this year we have 63 solo/duo, and to me it's become the real musical gem of the whole event."<sup>60</sup> Also, a Category 5 brand amplifier was added to go along with the Gibson Flying V guitar in the Albert King Award prize package. In the February 3 issue of the *Commercial Appeal*, it was reported, "This weekend's International Blues Challenge is filling hotels, clubs, and restaurants – a local economic impact that reached \$1.3 million for last year's event, according to the Memphis Convention & Visitors Bureau." When it was all said and done, Sean Carney a guitarist from Ohio, and his band won first place in the group division, and Carney also took home the Albert King Award: "I'm walking on air," Carney said as he greeted well-wishers after the win. "It's such an

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<sup>59</sup> Mark Jordan, "For 157 aspiring blues acts, the thrill is just the beginning – Growth of weekend's worldwide contest challenges Blues Foundation resources," *The Commercial Appeal*, February 2, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

honor to take the top prize, especially given all the talent that was on display here this week.”<sup>61</sup> Second place went to an unlikely recipient:

8-year-old Tanya Perry of Tupelo was nervous before taking the stage with her brothers, Ryan, 14, and Kyle, 12. But the siblings’ band Homemade Jamz, together only a year and representing the Mississippi Delta Blues Society of Indianola, Miss., had the audience on their feet for the evening’s only standing ovation.<sup>62</sup>

Third place went to a soul blues band from Raleigh, N.C. called Mighty Lester. In the solo/duo division, first place was awarded to Nathan James and Ben Hernandez of the Blues Lovers United of San Diego. Cincinnati guitar virtuoso, Sonny Moorman took second place.

In preparation for the 2008 International Blues Challenge, an unusual article was published which stated, “During the 2008 International Blues Challenge today and Friday, a mobile dental unit supplied by American Mobile Dental will be at W.C. Handy Park from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. to offer free oral examinations, X-rays and minor treatments, such as fillings.”<sup>63</sup> This kind of accommodation was representative of the Blues Foundation’s efforts to do all they could to lure artists and patrons to the event, and the list of people involved in the production included “500 volunteers and judges, and several thousand blues fans...”<sup>64</sup> Also, the list of entrants jumped again this year (from 157 to 159), and a new record for international participation was also set as participants were drawn from 10 countries and six continents. Jay Sieleman remarks, “This is the first year

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<sup>61</sup> Jordan, “Sean Carney not blue after third try at IBC – Ohio axman takes two awards; James, Hernandez honored,” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 5, 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> “Coffee Break – Your Super Bowl party can score big for Habitat for Humanity’s home team,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Jan 31, 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Bob Mehr, “Beale Street singin’ the blues – Challenge lures musicians near and far seeking their big break,” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 1, 2008.

we've had acts from South Africa and Argentina appearing."<sup>65</sup> This year, top honors in the group competition went to the Kansas City Blues Society's nominee, Trampled Under Foot. Shakura S'Aida from Toronto won second place while third place went to a Baton Rouge group called the Lil' Ray Neal Band. In the solo/duo category, Colorado musician, Lionel Young won first place with Ben Prestage of the Blues Alliance of the Treasure Coast taking second.

Sieleman remarked that developing the IBC's events was a top priority of the Blues Foundation and that the changing face of its demographic was a good sign: "While some of the people who participate have been playing music for 30 or 40 years, we've seen increasing numbers of young acts getting involved and participating. Both last year and this year we'll have an entire club devoted just to younger acts."<sup>66</sup> He went on to say, "One of the things we have talked about is having a youth IBC. To try and do something when the kids are not in school..."<sup>67</sup>

But regardless of what the Blues Foundation has in store, it seems certain that future IBC patrons can expect upcoming challenges to be bigger and better than ever. This year, the IBC approaches its silver anniversary, and once again blues musicians will fly in from all around the world to compete for cash, prizes, and notoriety. Dates are set for February 4-6, 2009.

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**Table 2: IBC General Information**

Year	Name	# Entrants	Where	Prizes
1984	Blues Amateur Talent Contest	?	Memphis (Daisy Theatre(s))	One minor gig in a Beale St. club
1985	Blues Amateur Talent Contest	?	Memphis (Daisy Theatre(s))	?
1986	National Blues Amateur Talent Contest	?	Memphis (Daisy Theatre(s))	?
1987	National Blues Amateur Act of the Year	?	Memphis (Daisy Theatre(s))	?
1988	National Blues Amateur Act of the Year	?	Memphis (Daisy Theatre(s))	?
1989	National (Blues?) Amateur Talent Contest	?	Memphis (Daisy Theatre(s))	?
1990	National Blues Amateur Talent Contest	35	Memphis (Daisy Theatre(s))	\$500; Malaco recording package; gig at Handy Awards, Lucille Award
1991	National Blues Amateur Talent Contest	?	New Daisy Theatre	?
1992	9 <sup>th</sup> National Amateur Blues Talent Competition	?	?	B.B. King Lucille Award
1993	10 <sup>th</sup> National Blues Amateur Talent Competition	17	Beale Street	\$1000, performace at Handy's, Lucille Award, 2 <sup>nd</sup> = \$500, 3 <sup>rd</sup> = \$300, Albert King
1994	11 <sup>th</sup> National Blues Talent Competition	?	Memphis, TN & Helena, AR (Finals held at New Daisy Theatre)	\$1,000; Gigs: Handys, Memphis in May, Springing the Blues Festival, King Biscuit Festival; 8 hours at Phillips Recording Studio; 2 <sup>nd</sup> place: \$500, Albert King
1995	12 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Talent Competition	"40 (+) acts from around the world"	Memphis, TN & Helena, AR	\$1,000; 12 hours @ House of Blues Recording Studio; Gigs: Ultimate Rhythm & Blues Cruise, Handys, King Biscuit Festival, Albert King
1996	13 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Talent Competition	?	Memphis, TN & Helena, AR, Oct 22-24	\$1,000; 12 hours @ House of Blues Recording Studio; Gigs: Ultimate Rhythm & Blues Cruise, Handys, King Biscuit Festival, Albert King
1997	14 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Talent Competition	?	Oct 22-24, Beale Sreet	\$1,000; 12 hours @ House of Blues Recording Studio; Gigs: Ultimate Rhythm & Blues Cruise, Handys, King Biscuit Festival, Albert King

1998	15 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Talent Competiton	34	Beale Street: Alfred's, The Black Diamond, The Hard Rock Cafe	Third Place now awarded \$250
1999	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
2000	16 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Challenge	54	Finals at New Daisy	\$1,000; 10 hours recording time @ Ardent, 1,000 free CD's, web page from 305 Spin, AK
2001	17 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Challenge	53	Beale Street, Finals at New Daisy	\$1,000; studio time @ Ardent, 1,000 CD's, web page, meetings with booking and publicity people, festival appearances, AK
2002	18 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Challenge	53	Beale Street	IBC acoustic division introduced: winner = \$500, studio time, free CD production, AK
2003	19 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Challenge	68	Beale Street	\$1000, studio time, appearances, web page, AK
2004	20 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Challenge	94	Beale Street, finals at New Daisy	\$1000, studio time, appearances, web page, AK
2005	21 <sup>st</sup> International Blues Challenge	126	15 clubs on Beale Street, finals at New Daisy	\$1000, studio time, appearances, web page, AK
2006	22 <sup>nd</sup> International Blues Challenge	130	Beale Street, Finals at Center for South. Folklore and New Daisy	\$1500 for group, \$1000 for solo, studio time, appearances, web page, AK
2007	23 <sup>rd</sup> International Blues Challenge	157	Various clubs on Beale Street	\$1000, appearances, studio time, \$1000 for solo/duo, AK
2008	24 <sup>th</sup> International Blues Challenge	160	Every blues club on Beale rented, Orpheum used for finals	\$1000, appearances, studio time, \$1000 for solo/duo, AK



Year	1 <sup>st</sup> Solo/Duo	2 <sup>nd</sup> Solo/Duo	3 <sup>rd</sup> Solo/Duo	1 <sup>st</sup> Group	2 <sup>nd</sup> Group	3 <sup>rd</sup> Group	Albert King
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1984	NA	NA	NA	Reliance	NA	NA	NA
1985	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA
1986	NA	NA	NA	Arletta Nightingale	NA	NA	NA
1987	NA	NA	NA	Larry Garner and the Boogaloo Blues Band	NA	NA	NA
1988	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA
1989	NA	NA	NA	John Weston	NA	NA	NA
1990	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA
1991	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA
1992	NA	NA	NA	Piano Bob Wilder & Ken "Snowman" Minahan (Miami)	Just Cuz (Phoenix)	OKC Experience (Oklahoma City)	NA
1993	NA	NA	NA	Evil Gal (Boston Blues Society)	Texas Ricky D (Arkansas Blues Society)	Lightnin' Charlie and the Upsetters (At-Large)	Joe Craig Jones
1994	Ian Collard	NA	NA	The Hardway Connection (Washington DC)	Susan Tedeschi Band (Boston Blues Society)	Michael Burks Band (Arkansas Blues Society)	Michael Burks
1995	-	-	-	The Movers (Boston Blues Society)	Sam Taylor Blues Band (Phoenix Blues Society)	Smilin' Vic and the Soul Monkeys (Oklahoma Blues Society)	Geoff Achison (Melbourne Blues Appreciation Society)
1996	Anne-Marie Sharry	NA	NA	Smilin' Vic and the Soul Monkeys (Oklahoma Blues Society)	Sistah Blue (Phoenix Blues Society)	--(tie) Matthew Skoller (Fox Valley Blues Society) and Little Boys Blue (Beale Street Blues)	Will Crosby (of Matthew Skoller Band)
1997	-	-	-	Chris Cameron (Fort Smith Blues Society)	Kevin Brown (Beale Street Blues Society)	-	-
1998	-	-	-	Abe Reid (Piedmont Blues Preservation Society)	Jocelyn B & the Detroit Street Players (Detroit Blues Society)	Cotton Candy & So Many Men (Kansas City Blues Society)	Little Kirk (Beale Street Blues Society)
1999 (NA)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
2000	-	-	-	Dave Keyes Band (New	Sam Cockrell and the	Rab McCullough Blues	

				York Blues Society)	Groove (Fox Valley Blues Society)	Band (Belfast Blues Society)	
2001	-	-	-	Richard Johnston (Beale Street Blues Society)	Collard Greens & Gravy (Melbourne Blues Appreciation Society)	Peter Kern (Big Joe Turner Musician's Fund)	Richard Johnston
2002	Little Toby Walker (Long Island Blues Society)	-	-	Chef Chris and His Nairobi Trio (Canada South Blues Society)	Tyree Neal Band (Baton Rouge Blues Society)	Nicole Nelson Band (Boston Blues Society)	Tyree Neal
2003	Fiona Boyes (Melbourne Blues Appreciation Society)	-	-	Delta Moon (Charlotte Blues Society)	-	-	-
2004	Lightnin' Lee & the Upright Rooster (Spa City Blues Society—Hot Springs AR)	-	-	Zac Harmon and the Midsouth Blues Revue (Southern California Blues Society-Los Angeles CA)	Reverend Slick and the Soul Blues Boys (Howlin Wolf Blues Society—West Point MS)	The Matthew Stubbs Band (Boston Blues Society—Boston MA)	Slick Ballinger
2005	Jimmy Hocking	-	-	Diunna Greenleaf & Blue Mercy	Lady X & The Sunshine Band	Teeny Tucker Band	Jon Richardson of Blue Mercy
2006	Eden Brent, Mississippi Delta Blues Society	-	-	Joey Gilmore, the South Florida Blues Society	Aunt Kizzy'z Boyz, Blues Lovers United of San Diego	Jill West and Blues Attack, The Blues Society of Western PA	Zack Weisinger with the Jill West and Blues Attack
2007	Nathan James and Ben Hernandez (Blues Lovers United of San Diego)	Sonny Moorman (Cincy Blues Society)	-	Sean Carney (Columbus Blues Alliance)	Homemade Jamz' Blues Band—14, 12 and 8 (Mississippi Delta Blues Society)	Mighty Lester (Triangle Blues Society)	Sean Carney
2008	Lionel Young (Colorado Blues)	Ben Prestage (Blues)	-	Trampled Under Foot (Kansas City Blues)	Shakura S'Aida (Toronto Blues)	Lil' Ray Neal Band (Baton Rouge Blues)	-

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