Festival Of The Blues

Last weekend the blues, in all its many moods, met with many of its famed—now legendary—performers, staged by Ann Arbor.

Our city is no stranger to musical gatherings, but this was an event of such scope and size that we had been warned, and then the famous pianist Roosevelt Sykes opened the program Friday night and the venerable Son House, strumming the almost forgotten National steel guitar, and joined by his wife in the closing "gospel" blues, we were captivated by the heart of the only true musical core America has produced.

We heard the original blues, and we heard the derivatives, artist followed artist, mood changed, blended, and transformed. It was an experience, rather than a concert, and at the end we were drained—even purified—by the blues.

Those who sat through the entire 24 hours of Blues came away without cobwebs, topcoats, and boxes.

On the liner notes of an old (1949) Josh White record, musicologist Alan Lomax wrote, "The Blues will still be growing, I have no doubt, when the first space ship takes off for the moon." The Ann Arbor Blues Festival proved Lomax a prophet last weekend. Let us hope that next year the festival will be repeated, and the prophecy will continue to be fulfilled.

Only a few of the dozens of Bluesmen can possibly be pictured on a page such as this, and we have chosen some of the old-timers who have "paid the dues." Top left is James Cotton, and top right the moon and a spotlight outline of Muddy Waters, guitarist, at left Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton and T-Bone Walker, above Lightnin' Hopkins (crowd reflected in his glasses), right Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup and Sleepy John Estes, below left Howlin' Wolf, and below right the legendary Son House, who closed the festival program by going back to the origins of the Blues—back to the Mississippi Delta. This may well have been Son House's last public appearance, but it was a glorious one.

By Doug Fulton