

Blues band's reunion draws wild ovations

By Michael St. John

Music writer

Masters of mellow, lords of laid-back and revered like royalty 15 years after a formal break-up, the Siegel-Schwall Blues Band returned to Madison for a rare appearance Saturday night.

Named for harmonica and piano whiz Corky Siegel and electrified acoustic guitarist Jim Schwall, the foursome also included longtime mate Rollo Radford on bass and veteran bluesman Sam Lay on drums.

Based in Chicago-style blues, the band last appeared in Madison in 1972. Siegel, as a soloist, most recently played the Civic Center opening for comedian George Carlin in 1982.

But to hear the welcoming ovation from the audience at the Barrymore, these were old pals who hadn't been heard from since love beads and moccasins were traded in for neckties and wing tips.

Most songs came from the new nine-song "Reunion Concert" recording, a live effort taped when the Siegel-Schwall outfit joined an anniversary celebration for Chicago radio station WXRT-FM last year.

Schwall vocalized first with "I Think It Was the Wine," sharing considerable instrumental solo space with Siegel's harmonica.

The resulting wild ovation was enough to stop the performers dead in their tracks before Siegel finally countered with his own tour de force, "Hey, Billie Jean."

Demonstrating the mesmerizing effect of this band's extreme dynamics, Siegel played his harp so softly (with only Lay's clicking drumsticks for accompaniment), that the crowd sat as silent as a church congregation. Every listener was entranced by the barely audible melodies Siegel offered.

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When a lengthy crescendo eventually had the whole band up to full force, the audience responded with the hand-clapping equivalent of a resounding "Amen."

Schwall's first slide guitar segment won an instant rave response from the assembly. Radford matched that effect when he took to a vocal microphone for an impassioned "I Wanna Love Ya." The group capped the first of two nearly hourlong sets with the shuffling "Hush, Hush."

Set two began with a duet rendering of "When I've Been Drinkin'," again with their hypnotic style that was so laid-back, the audience would have fallen on its collective rear-end without backs on the chairs.

Other highlights included Radford's fiery "Corina," Schwall's spirited mandolin work on "Bring It with You When You Come" and his slide guitar-vocal showcase, "You Don't Love Me Like That."

Lay got almost a dozen dancers out front with his vocal version of "Got My Mojo Working" in the first encore.

The second included Schwall's disclaimer, "We know this song, we just haven't learned it yet," and the evening ended with an effervescent "Caledonia."

It's unfortunate the Siegel-Schwall Band doesn't consider casting its musical spell on a regular basis.

The magic is certainly still there.

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