

Bus brings the blues back to Maxwell Street

BY JEFF JOHNSON

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Sometimes a journey of a thousand miles starts with an ancient school bus.

For vendors, preservationists, musicians, city officials and nostalgia buffs, the Blues Bus represents more than trivia on wheels. It's a symbol of renewal for the venerable Maxwell Street Market.

The thriving marketplace on the Near West Side fell victim to urban renewal and expansion of the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. But come Sunday, when the Blues Bus rolls up and blues artists jam nearby, old-timers may feel a momentary flashback to bygone days.

"I would love to recreate that environment," says Ndidika Vernon, the market's general manager since March, for the Mayor's Office of Special Events. "I've been telling musicians, 'If you have friends, come out and sit on one of the corners and play your guitars or whatever.'"

So far, the bluesman who has answered the call most frequently has been David "Chainsaw" Dupont, who will be on hand with his full band Sunday. Steve Pasek, Dupont's manager and songwriting partner, says the bus will serve as a backdrop and focal point for the performance.

"I think there is a real spirit of renewal there," says Pasek, who encourages other artists to come out and jam.

Electricity is provided, but not pay, says Vernon. "I welcome musicians to come, but they have to put out a hat. I hope to have a budget for music soon."

That would be a welcome development, says Michael Frank, president of Chicago's Earwig Records and manager of David "Honeyboy" Edwards, a 95-year-old Delta bluesman who, like other artists from the South, played Maxwell Street soon after migrating to Chicago. "One time, Honeyboy and I played down there a couple of years ago to see how much it had changed since he played there in the '40s. He said it was a lot different."



The Maxwell Street Blues Bus rolls into town on Sunday for some serious blues jams. | © ROBERT WEIGLEIN

MAXWELL STREET MARKET

MUSIC BY DAVID 'CHAINSAW' DUPONT AND OTHER BLUES ARTISTS

- ◆ Market open from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday, with the Blues Bus parked on site all day
- ◆ 640 W. Roosevelt (Desplaines and Roosevelt)
- ◆ Free
- ◆ (312) 745-4676; maxwellstreet.org

No one is trying to pass off the restored market as the real thing. To find out what the original was like, check out "And This Is Free," the outstanding "you are there" documentary from the mid-'60s. If you venture over to the area around Polk and Desplaines on Sunday, though, you'll find about 300 vendors, several of them selling ethnic foods.

You'll also get a glimpse at the Blues Bus that was a fixture at the market in its heyday. Elder John Johnson, the owner who converted the bus to a rolling record shop, drove it to Maxwell Street every weekend in the summers and took it down South in winters. Johnson

says he left the bus with the Maxwell Street Foundation when he moved back down South for good, and now owns a smaller version that he takes to festivals in his native Mississippi and Arkansas.

"It's an inspirational place that God put in the midst of the civil rights movement to be an ongoing piece of democracy," Johnson says of the big blue bus. "The bus belongs to Chicago. God told me not to take it out of Chicago."

Johnson says the bus is symbolic to him because he rode a bus 60 miles a day to school because of Southern segregation in the 1950s, and later became one of the first students to desegregate a formerly all-white school in his Mississippi hometown. He arrived in Chicago in the early '60s in a blue station wagon and traded up to the bus, he says. For a time, he parked it in Hyde Park and lived there.

Laura Kamedulski of the Maxwell Street Foundation says the bus provides a "down-home, country kind of feel" that links the market to the South as well as the blues. The foundation also takes the bus to the Chicago Blues Festival and other events where it can focus attention on the market. Kamedulski says the one-

time rolling record store no longer is used to peddle music, mainly because most festivals where it is on display have sponsorship deals with large retailers.

And while champions of Maxwell Street envision a thriving, year-round blues

scene on the site, don't expect to be hearing the next Muddy Waters or Bo Diddley there anytime soon, Frank cautions. Then again, "American Idol" runner-up Crystal Bowersox kick-started her career by busking in Chicago.

"There's a certain level of

musicians who would definitely be interested [if the city begins paying artists]," Frank says. "They might play there if it got publicity — young folks starting out and people who are struggling and poor."

Seems like old times.

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