

John Nemeth

‘Names the Day’
for Honesdale

By Mark Uricheck



There are some classic names from the golden age of soul music that come up during the course of a conversation with John Nemeth. Legendary shouters like Wilson Pickett, Solomon Burke, and Otis Redding all come to mind when listening to the Boise, Idaho, native belt out a funky, emotive tune. Nemeth's bound to make it messy and spill some soul all over the stage at this year's Honesdale Roots & Rhythm Festival on Saturday, June 19th.

"There's also Percy Sledge, James Carr, Hank Ballard when he was doing his funky stuff," continues Nemeth, chatting about influences. "Junior Wells kind of creeps in there, too. He's the guy that got me singing the blues. This new album has that funky, 60's soul/blues vibe about it."

The album Nemeth speaks of is his latest disc on Blind Pig Records, "Name The Day." The follow-up to his critically acclaimed "Love Me Tonight" CD, which dominated the blues music charts and earned him a Blues Music Award nomination for Contemporary Blues Male Artist of the Year, was released in May and is already garnering praise from the roots music community for its hip, funky, James Brown-by-way-of-Memphis soulful style and Nemeth's colorful harmonica voicing.

"I've taken on a little more of an introspective vibe after the 'Love Me Tonight,'" Nemeth says regarding the new album. "I've always been a fan of those southern soul ballads, and of stuff like Roy Orbison, too. He did a great job of writing songs like that. I listened to Roy a lot as a kid." It's the soul that's at the core of what he does, and he makes no bones about it. "You know, I just love that soul music," he says. "It's got a little country flair about it, the blues, and everything else that makes America great, all wrapped up."

Much of where John Nemeth is at today musically can be traced back to when he made the move from Idaho to San Francisco, where his musical colors really began to bleed through.

"When I moved to San Francisco, I met all sorts of great players," Nemeth recalls. "The whole Bay Area has a great wealth of talent and a really positive attitude. I ran into cats like Kid Anderson, who plays with Rick Estrin and The Nightcats now, Bobby Welsh, Mark Hummel, Risk Estrin, Elvin Bishop. I was also able to go see some great old Oakland soul singers like Freddie Hughes, Roger Collins, guys like that. Everybody I use on my albums is from the bay area; we just all kind of speak the same language. San Francisco definitely changed my outlook on music."

Nemeth is quick to mention the different grooves and rhythmic styles that were floating around the Bay Area scene; an instant source of inspiration for him. He points out that he's still fascinated by trying out a new sense of rhythm.

"I got this new drummer, Nick Fishman," Nemeth says. "He's really a powerhouse guy, kind of like a guy that would play with The Meters. We're able to do some real funky, cool numbers with that guy."

Another key ingredient to Nemeth's soulful sound is his horn section, which provides just the right blast of brass to inject that extra shot of energy into the music. The horns have drawn comparisons to the classic Memphis, Stax Records type of sound.

"I think that's the key, having a horn guy that can put the right groove into all the right spots," says Nemeth. "My guys really build the sound up. It's as big of a charge as you can get, and my guys really know the material - they play with a lot of feeling. When you hit a break, and you've got a long horn line, with some great percussive stuff, it really makes the music roll and move."

Nemeth's new "Name The Day" album is even more of a personal music statement, in the fact that he self-produced the disc. Happy to be at the helm, without an outside influence steering him in more of a commercial direction,

Nemeth was free to give the album the treatment he envisioned.

"When I make records, I make records for not just listeners, but for musicians as well as myself," he admits. "I like to make a record that you can sit down and listen to and take it all in because there are a lot of things happening. I build the sound. There's going to be more than one guitar track. There's going to be organ, Fender Rhodes, piano, harmonica, and percussive instruments all happening on the CD. Producing allows me to have full artistic freedom over the sound."

Of course, the sound would be nothing without the songs to back it up. Nemeth has compiled a great bunch of tracks for this new CD, from the manic bass line that propels the ultra-danceable "Breakin' Free" to the laid back, slick edginess of "Do You Really Want That Woman."

"It was pretty easy to get the ball rolling," Nemeth says of his songwriting for the new disc. "The only part that becomes a little tricky is nailing the song down. With this vintage style of songwriting, you can't say everything you want to say; I had to watch my multi-syllable and rhyming words. I was careful to scale the song back so the message is clear. That's something you've got to be careful of in writing for soul and blues music. That was the trick for me, to make it simple and clear. That's what I think made all those old songs so great."

Nemeth is overwhelmingly positive when speaking not only about his own music, but also the contemporary blues/roots scene of which he is an integral part.

"Man, there are a lot of great bands out there," he says. "And there are a lot of young people that are getting into it in other ways. There's the whole Mississippi hill country blues thing, and the whole New Orleans revival that's happening. There's a great soul revival with people like Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings - it really does seem like a revival era in this genre of music. That's what you need, a rebirth to happen. Pretty soon, it'll just keep on growing."

Make no mistake, John Nemeth is a name that's going to stick around for a while. His dedication and respect for the music is evident. For Nemeth, music is a calling.

"I knew this is what I was going to do since I was sixteen," he says. "I really didn't have a passion for anything else. I never really thought about anything else. The best part of doing this is the feeling that I get every night. It's like a charge for my soul I guess. That's the feeling I get from doing this music."

John Nemeth will play the
Honesdale Roots & Rhythm Festival
on Saturday June 19th, at the
Central Park Main Stage.
John's set will begin at 4:20 p.m.
For more information on the
Roots & Rhythm Festival, check out
www.honesdalerootsandrhythm.com.
Don't forget John Nemeth's site,
www.johnnemethblues.com.