

Bluesman Levy Reclaims

By DANIEL GEWERTZ

Blues keyboard ace Ron Levy has come back home to the stage.

After a decade of record producing and label administration, the esteemed organ and piano veteran is hitting the boards and feeling rejuvenated. "I'm 18 years old again in terms of enthusiasm," Levy said last

week from his Newburyport office.

MUSIC

All through the '90s, while Levy produced records, first for Rounder/Bullseye Blues, and then for Cannonball, his band Wild Kingdom was a revolving batch of top studio musicians, cutting discs and disbanding. But now Levy's Kingdom has been reborn as a live outfit.

"I never got to play my Wild Kingdom songs live before, because they were too complicated for a pickup band to jam on. But now, finally, I have a real band, and they're pulling them all off. After all these years of writing ... actually playing my songs in front of people! I'm digging it big time," said Levy, whose Wild Kingdom roves into Johnny D's on Saturday.

In the early and mid-'90s, Levy helped create Rounder's Bullseye Blues label, and served as its house producer and talent scout. He brought in such greats as the late Charles Brown and Lowell Fulson, and produced CDs by Roomful of Blues, his former band. His years at Rounder coincided with the duration of his marriage to the label's co-owner, Marian Leighton.

Two years ago, Levy dove further into front-office duties. Moving to Minnesota, he became co-owner of a new blues label, Cannonball. He produced 20 albums in as many months, including work by Charles Earland and Otis Rush. He also recorded "Greaze Is What's Good," a Wild Kingdom CD. "Unfortunately, the distribution was like the Loch Ness monster: there were rumors, but no one could prove it was really there," joked Levy. (The disc is available from his Web site www.levtron.com.)



RON LEVY: Blues keyboardist returns to the stage.

tron.com.)

This business disappointment paved the way for Levy's return to his boyhood love: playing the blues live. Born in Cambridge in 1951, Levy lived in Brookline in the '60s. In 1964, he saw his first concert, Ray Charles, and began playing piano the next day.

By '65 he was hanging out at Louie's Lounge, the Club 47 and Sunday matinees at Paul's Mall, fascinated by legends such as Muddy Waters, Otis Spann and Howlin' Wolf. By the age of 15 he began backing up Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Big Mama Thornton and John Lee Hooker when they came to town, often accompanied by fellow teens Peter Malick on guitar and Willie Alexander on drums.

Then, at age 18, Levy joined B.B. King's band for seven years, playing more than 300 gigs a year. "We had pride as a unit," he said. "We could kick anybody's butt, and we'd better, or we'd catch hell from B.B. That band caused lots of divorces. It was like military service, and we were always off at war."

Nowadays, Wild Kingdom is up to 10 gigs a month, playing its sophisticated yet groove-crazy brand of modern blues, jazz, r & b, gospel and Latin "all glued together."

Doing the thing is still Levy's Hammond organ, which weighs 385 pounds.

"Other keyboards are toys to me," said Levy. "With (a Hammond) B3 organ, you're driving a Cadillac. Everything else is a Geo."

Wild Kingdom plays Johnny D's in Somerville on Saturday. Tickets are \$7. Call (617) 776-2004.

Wild Kingdom

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RON LEVY'S WILD KINGDOM GREAZE IS WHAT'S GOOD

Cannonball

Ron Levy is the ultimate blues keyboard player. A former member of Roomful of Blues and a veteran of six years with B.B. King, Levy has lent his swirling B-3 organ playing and studio know-how to albums by Champion Jack Dupree, Ronnie Earl, Lowell Fulson, and Jimmy McCracklin. On the first album since his departure from Cambridge-based Rounder Records, Levy showcases the many sides of his musical persona. While the blues continue to reside at the core of his arrangements, Levy successfully incorporates elements of funk, hip-hop, Miles Davis-like jazz, reggae, acid jazz, and pop. Levy's skills as an accompanist are given a challenging workout by an all-star aggregate of musicians, including jazz trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, blues guitarist Preston Shannon, and vocalists Michelle Wilson and Ray Greene. Hip-hop style rapping, by Rob Raw and Caesar, provides a modern flavor to "Gangsta's To Blame" and "Mr. Mr. Blasta From The Past'da," while the syncopated rhythms of jazz drummer Idriss Muhammed anchor a soulful rendition of Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin' On."

"The Wild Kingdom's tight collaboration of Coltrane-esque jams, percussion and delectable guitar riffs are classic B-3 organ soul."