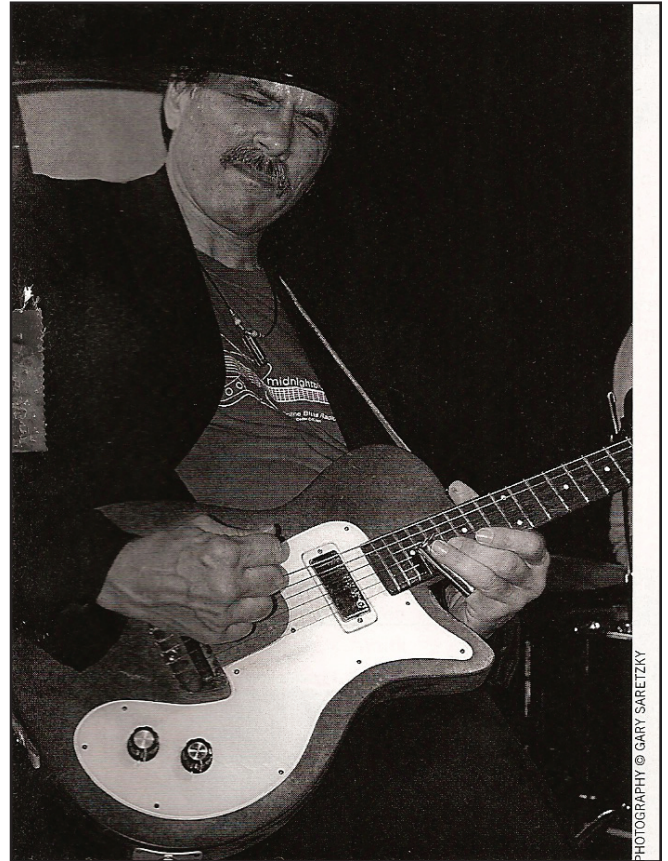


Stuebaker John & the Hawks • A.J.'s Sports Bar & Nite Club Levittown, Pennsylvania • Oct. 19

CHICAGO'S Stuebaker John Grimaldi and his band, the Hawks, kicked off a brief East Coast tour in the support of their latest album, *Self-Made Man*, as part of the Blue Thursday Series. Now in its 11th year, Blue Thursday keeps the blues alive in the Philadelphia area with local, regional, and national acts. This was Grimaldi's third and best appearance at "Blue Thursday," and he hit the stage running as 125-plus patrons erupted with hearty cheers and applause during Blues DJ Eros' introduction.

In the style of Hound Doug Taylor and J.B. Hutto, Grimaldi played three exuberant, hard-rocking sets, each filled with hook-laden originals. (A prolific composer, Grimaldi rarely plays covers.) His repertoire this evening was largely made up of neck-snapping boogies, slithery shuffles, stop-time grinders, Junior Wellsian funk romps, swamp rockers, and stompers that owed as much to Link Wray as to Taylor. The propulsive rhythm section of drummer Paul Ashford (formerly with Maurice John Vaughn) and bassist Bob Halaj (Eddy Clearwater, Son Seals) laid down a pulse-pounding bottom for Grimaldi's searing slide and raucous harp, keeping the dancers active all night. Halaj's funk-fired bass lines and sonorous chords were particularly impressive, especially when Grimaldi put his guitar aside to play harp.



The first two sets showcased tunes from the singer/song-writer/harpist/slide guitarist's new album (self-produced and released on his own Avanti label). As slide dominates *Self-Made Man*, there was more slide than harp in the mix during this performance. Favorites included "Ride, Ride, Ride," "Walkin' in the Rain," "So Happy Together," "Rockin' Like Crazy," "Back in Your Town," and the autobiographical title track. The harp tunes – "Fast in the Slow Lane," "Ride With Me Baby," "Where Are You," and the rollicking "Roller Coaster" homage "All Aboard (the Streamliner)" – forcefully demonstrated Grimaldi's Little Walter-19ike prowess. He's one of the best harpists in the land.

One surprise during the second set was Grimaldi's thunderous, Diddleyesque thumper "Fine Cadillac," recorded by Guitar Shorty on his most recent album but still unrecorded by Grimaldi himself. Another was the evening's first slow sone, the plaintive "If I Had a Nickel," more Sonny Boy Williamson than Little Walter, from Grimaldi's 2004 album *Between Life & Death*; it was a favorite of Grimaldi's recently deceased friend Roger Driver and was dedicated to his memory. It's rare to hear a blues artist perform three sets of irresistible originals, and it's even rarer for that artist to stay "in the zone" from first song to last.

-- Thomas J. Cullen III