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THE 27TH ANNUAL Chicago Blues Festival hosted a couple of legends. It paired up famed harpist James Cotton and the great Matt "Guitar" Murphy on Friday night. For long-time Chicago Blues fans, this was a reunion of sorts. Cotton and Murphy are old cohorts who worked together for many years before Murphy left to join the Blues Brothers franchise. Most casual fans will remember Murphy as the husband to Aretha Franklin's character in the movie, but die-hard fans know that Murphy was a well established artist long before Saturday Night Live aired on television. Murphy was an integral part of pianist Memphis Slim's sound for over 20 years and can be heard on many of his earlier recordings. He has also worked with other legends such as the incomparable Ms. Etta James, Sonny Boy Williamson, Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters, Otis Rush and.... well you get the idea.

Murphy had a stroke in 2001. Many fans have been blogging all over the internet looking for the beloved guitarist since it happened, wondering how he was doing, what his condition was, and was he playing. At the Chicago Blues Festival, Cotton and his backing band featuring Rico McFarland on guitar began the set and brought Murphy on as his very special guest.

Though McFarland is an accomplished guitarist in his own right, he played the part of the Junior Statesmen assisting Murphy with his equipment, setting the microphone straight, and helping him with his chair. Murphy is legendary for his articulate sophistication on the guitar and though there are two conflicting birthdates, 1929 and 1927, he is 80 plus. Factoring that in along with his recent stroke and one would



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James Cotton and Matt "Guitar" Murphy Chicago Blues Festival • June 2010

not expect much articulation, but one would be wrong.

The exchange between Murphy and Cotton was electric and it seemed as though there was no break in their partnership. Lighting struck the stage in the form of Murphy's blistering guitar licks. His ever-present large, warm grin drew the audience in, and his stinging rhythms left them speechless.

Murphy's jazz inflected licks rang true almost every time. There was even some friendly head cutting with McFarland, who encouraged and egged on Murphy to stretch himself to his full artistic lengths which he gladly did to the joy of the audience. The relationship shown on stage between McFarland and Murphy was a wonder to witness. It seemed as though you could visually see the torch being passed to McFarland by Murphy, but then you could also see Murphy renegeing because he wanted to play just a little bit more; McFarland happy to oblige.

The theme of the day was "Smokestack Lightning" in honor of Howlin' Wolf's centennial. How appropriate because the lightning was defiantly stacked on this smokin' hot set. Fear not internet bloggers Matt Murphy is playing and his chops are great.

– Sandra Pointer-Jones