

BLUES REVUE

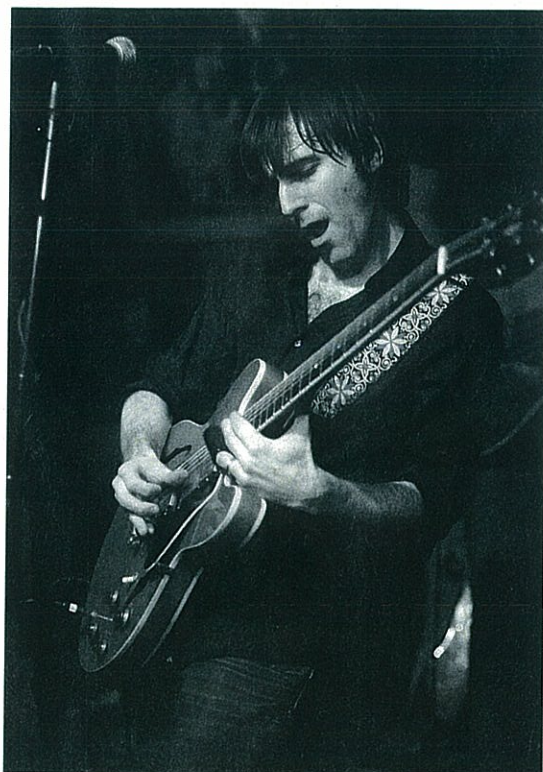
Chris Bergson Band • Rodeo Bar New York City • Jan. 10

ISSUE 111
APRIL/MAY 2008

It takes a confident musician to pack his band with some of the hottest players in New York City, but singer/songwriter/guitarist Chris Bergson is equal to the company he keeps. On this night, he shared the foreground of a tiny stage with saxophone wizard Jay Collins and keyboardist Bruce Katz (a Pinetop Perkins Piano Player of the Year nominee at this year's Blues Music Awards). The star power was anchored by drummer Diego Voglino and electric bassist Tim Luntzel, who shared their crowded space with cow skulls, a black velvet Elvis, and a gigantic buffalo head in front of a packed house of cheering, whistling fans.

With his shy grin and mop of unruly hair, Bergson might remind you of your high-school boyfriend — at least until he straps on his shiny red Gibson and steps up to the mike. Starting with the rocking “Gowanus Heights” from his recently released album *Fall Changes*, the young virtuoso took charge of the stage. He growled out vivid lyrics about Brooklyn street life and launched a series of dazzling

flights of fancy on the guitar, playing as organically as if the instrument were a third arm. On “Latitude,” a song about coming to grips with compromise, Bergson’s raucous guitar was the



PHOTOGRAPHY © AHRON R. FOSTER

sound of ambivalence, like an argument where no one gives in. The first set also featured a few selections from the band’s 2005 record, *Another Day*, including the moody title song, built around a spooky sax-and-guitar riff that moved between minor and major keys. The beautiful “High Above the Morning” brought a guitar solo thrilling enough to make you cry, while “Greyhound Station,” about searching for artistic inspiration, showcased Katz’s soulful organ playing. Eyes closed and head thrown back, he catapulted the audience through several aural universes in a few brief moments.

Bergson showed off his Delta blues skills on the ominous “Three Sisters” and the Mississippi Fred McDowell-inspired “Rain Beatin’ Down” from the new album. With only Voglino playing softly behind him, Bergson’s sensual slide guitar

brought home the conjugal feeling as vividly as his passionate lyrics. The room hushed for “Sanctuary,” a love song embroidered by Katz’s tender piano and Collins’ provocative sax. On Collins’ “The Engine,” the band hit its explosive peak, Bergson’s slide threatening to careen out of control like the relationship described in the song. Driven by the drums and Luntzel’s tough bass groove, Katz’s piano burst forth as if he’d been building up to it all night.

The band had fun with covers like Dylan’s “When I Paint My Masterpiece” and John Prine’s “Sweet Revenge.”

Another highlight was the Otis Redding chestnut “You Left the Water Running,” with Katz’s cooking organ and Collins’ sly, playful baritone sax. Side-by-side shouting by Bergson and Collins was perfect for this funky classic, showing that two rough voices can combine for a sweet and soulful sound. The energy level didn’t drop as the evening progressed: Bergson’s last solo of the night — on Freddie King’s “The Stumble,” covered on his 2003 album *Blues* — was as fresh, inventive, and fired-up as the first.

— Kay Cordtz