

European Blues Union and EBC

The Finnish Blues Society (FBS) has participated from the beginning in the creation of the European Blues Union, FBS has over the years organized and sponsored several national competitions together with the Puistoblues Festival organisation to choose representatives to the annual EBC competitions. These EBC entrants are as follows: The Hi-Five Quintet (2023), The Lumberjacks (2022), Jo' Buddy & Down Home King III feat. Nieminen (2019), Slim Butler & The Slim Cuts (2018), Honey B Family (2017), Lena Lindroos & The Slide Brothers (2016), Micke Bjorklof & Blue Strip (2015), Ina Forsman & Helge Tallqvist Band (2014), Honey B & T-Bones (2013), Ismo Haavisto Band (2012), Micke & Lefty feat. Chef (2011).

Finnish Blues Society's Road to European Blues Union

It happened in the spring of 2008 that the office of the Finnish Blues Society received a somewhat vague notice; some conclave in Europe was asking to join a project, the aim of which was to create a European association like the American Blues Foundation. That meeting was planned for Finland's holiest weekend - Midsummer! Nevertheless, a group of FBS actives went on a trip to Italy in June 2008, when the first European Blues Conference was held near Parma in Salsomaggiore Terme,

A 5-man working group was responsible for preparing the conference agenda and invitation list, which included Jay Sieleman from the Blues Foundation, Norwegian Jostein Forsberg (Notodden Blues Festival), French Jean Guillermo (Blues Sur Seine Festival), German Thomas Ruf (Ruf Records) and the representative of the organizing country Ferdinando Vighi, vice-president of the Italian Roots'n'Blues association. On the spot, a fairly large selection of European blues talent arrived in Italy, forty participants in total from 13 different countries (in addition to the ones mentioned above, there were people from Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Croatia, Switzerland, Ireland and, of course, Finland). There were representatives from both commercial (record companies, distributors, gig promoters) and ideological (magazines, associations) factions.

On both days, the seminar program also included visits to the Rootsway Parma Roots & Food Festival held in the province of Roccabianca, an open-air festival organized by the Po river at a place called Corte Le Giare di Ragazzola, where music and food were offered.

At the Parma conference, the creation of contacts began, getting to know the situations of different countries - those present also defined the conditions for the establishment of the European Blues Union.

This determination work was continued the following year when the second European Blues Conference was organized during Norway's Notodden Blues

Festival. Several working groups – only voluntary unpaid idealists – were dedicated to creating a sustainable form of organization and developing the union's rules. Finally, in June 2010, the six founding members officially registered the union in Brussels, Belgium, as required by European tradition.

At the third conference held in Hondarribia, Spain, in the summer of 2010, the EBU launched its first public project: the European Blues Challenge (EBC), a European blues competition held in Berlin on 18 and 19 March 2011.

Surely, we wondered a bit what would come of this, but we still went to Berlin - that's where Europe's "blues people" had gathered. The first European Blues Challenge (EBC2011) organized by the EBU was held at the Kulturbrauerei center in the Prenzlauer Berg area of Berlin. In this first event, a total of 16 bands from 16 countries performed over two nights. Finland's representative was Micke & Lefty feat. Chef. They were chosen by e-mail voting, in which Finnish blues organisations participated. The Belgian band Howlin' Bill won the competition. In connection with the EBC competition, the EBU's first General Meeting was also held. Nearly a hundred delegations from European countries participated in the meeting. In addition, Blues Foundation (Memphis) leader Jay Sieleman and his wife Priscilla were also present. The chairman of the meeting was Primus Motor Thomas Ruf. The association's executive board was elected at the meeting, and FBS/BN representative Pertti Nurmi was elected as a member - today he is EBU's Vice President.

A year later, another EBC competition was again held in Berlin. We went with the same concept; concerts on two nights (Fri, Sat) and then other activities. Finland was represented by Ismo Haavisto Band; Ismo rocked well in his red jacket - but still Norway's Rita Engedalen and her band Backbone took the victory - and no wonder! Berlin's third tenure remained unused; there was no partner organization there, so the arrangements were too difficult for Thomas Rufi - so somewhere else - for example in France.

Since 2013, the EBC competition has been organized every year in a different country. The third competition (EBC2013) was organized in Toulouse, France, in the luxurious Bikini hall. In addition to the music, I remember from that trip the boat trip to the concert venue and the tasty meals in the restaurant near the concert venue. Finland's representative was Honey B & T-Bones, who performed very well. However, the victory was taken by Italy's Veronica & The Red Wine Serenaders.

The fourth competition (EBC2014) was held in Riga, Latvia, at the Sapnu Fabrik cultural center. Finland was represented by young Ina Forsman & Helge Tallqvist Band. Yes, Ina impressed us all, even though the winner was the Spanish A Contra Blues – a very good band. This is where Ina's already internationally impressive career began.

The fifth competition (EBC2015) was played in Brussels, Belgium at the Ancienne Belgique theater, right in the city center. The final competition for Finland's representative selection was held in conjunction with Puistoblues at Restaurant Blackpool in Järvenpää (Thursday 26 June 2014). There were five bands in the competition, and as it happened - Micke was already sent for the second time - so Micke Bjorklof & Blue Strip were Finland's representatives. And the winners came from Spain - Travellin' Brothers.

The venue of the sixth competition (EBC2016) was Italy's Torrita di Siena and there the venue was a somehow gloomy Sport Hall. But the dinners served to the international blues crowd were top notch; the cooking school and its students put a lot of versatile and high-quality food on the table. The final competition for Finland's representative selection was organized in connection with Puistoblues for the second time at Restaurant Blackpool in Järvenpää (Thursday 25 June 2015). Lena Lindroos & The Slide Brothers were selected to represent Finland - they already participated in the qualifiers the previous year. The band also performed well in the actual competition, although the victory went to Norway - Eric "Slim" Zahl & The South West Swingers.

The seventh competition (EBC2017) was held in Denmark in a city called Horsens. The actual venue was the sports-concert arena Forum Horsens, a little outside the city - while the Blues Market and the general meeting were held in the former prison, FAEnglet, in a unique historical setting. The city of Horsens and the local blues association Blueskartelles host this most prestigious blues event in Europe. Finland was represented in the competition by Honey B Family - and the British Kaz Hawkins Band won the competition.

The eighth competition (EBC2018) took place in the hell of Norway – in a town called Hell near Trondheim. The local festival organization Blues In Hell was responsible for the well-functioning arrangements. The whole occasion took place in the same Scandic Hell hotel near the airport. It was not necessary to see the local sights either. That EBC competition took place in the handsome Scandic Amfi theater, with good sound and soft benches to sit in the evening. The level of this eighth European Blues Challenge competition was high and the margins in sports terms were said to be small. The Dutch "hippie" quintet The Ragtime Rumors, offering interesting mixed playing, was declared the winner. The representative of Finland, Slim Butler & The Slim Cuts, made people stomp with their natural and lively music. The boys didn't quite make it to the top three, but the show was noticed and there were enough questioners and talkers at the Blues Market. Maiju Lasola from FBS also participated in the judging as a member of the 6-member jury.

Also in connection with this EBC competition, the European Blues Union (EBU) handed out the Blues Behind The Scenes awards to distinguished background influencers and parties in the blues field. In the category "Promotion" the prize went to Lois van Hoef (Peer Blues Festival), the "Media" prize went to our 50-year old Blues News magazine and Maiju Lasola (President of FBS / Editor-in-chief of BN magazine) received it, the recipient of the "Production" prize was Thomas Ruf (Ruf Records) and the lifetime achievement award went to Jean Guillermo from France.

The ninth European Blues Competition (EBC2019) was organized in the Portuguese Azores, on the island of São Miguel, in a town called Ponta Delgada (5-6 April 2019). The main organizer of the events was Santa Maria Blues from the neighboring island, which also organizes a blues festival bearing its name. The UK's Kyla Brox Quartet won this year's European Blues Challenge, and no wonder, Kyla Brox has a dark, powerful voice, which she also skillfully used. Finland's representative was Jo' Buddy & Down Home King III feat. Nieminen. They were chosen in a qualifying competition, this time at Eikan Pub in Järvenpää.

The tenth European Blues Competition (EBC 2022) and the General Assembly of the European Blues Union (EBU) and the Open Blues Market event were organized in Malmö, Sweden, 3-4 June 2022. Due to the pandemic, the country and venue of the event had already been moved twice; in 2020 it was planned to be held in Zaandam in the Netherlands and in 2021 in Chorzow in Poland. Now it succeeded brilliantly in Malmö. Along with the EBU, the main organizer of the events was a joint venture: Malmoe - Copenhagen Blues Connexion. The venue was the luxurious Clarion Hotel Malmö Live and the concert and congress center connected to it.

Finland's EBC representative for this competition Malmö, Lumberjacks, was chosen at the competition at the Krapin Paja venue on 28 June 2019 to represent Finland already in the EBC2020 competition. The band's strong, polyphonic vocals didn't help, because Harlem Lake Band, reinforced with Dutch wind instruments, won this year's Challenge.

The eleventh blues competition (EBC2023) will take place 2-3 June 2023 in Chorzów, Poland, and Hi-Five Quintet will represent Finland there. The band was chosen to represent Finland at this year's European Blues Challenge at the Finnish competition held at the Tuusula's Krapin Paja venue on Friday evening, 1 July 2022. Constantine & The Call Operators, Gin Mill Trio and Nightbird also participated in this competition. The Finnish EBC final was carried out in cooperation with Puistoblues, the Finnish Blues Society and the Finnish members of the European Blues Union

We are now at the stage where the Finnish Blues Society / Blues News and Puistoblues will jointly organize the Finnish qualifier of the European Blues

Challenge (EBC2024). The final competition for Finland's representative selection will be held in connection with Puistoblues at Krapin Paja in Tuusula on Friday, 30 June 2023. The Finnish active members of the European Blues Union (EBU) have prequalified all registered artists (solo artists and bands) and four (4) ensembles has been selected for the final competition; and they are Kalla, Ville Mehto (solo), Million Dollar Tones, and Tina Bednoff & Cocktailers. In the final qualifying competition, an independent panel of experts will select Finland's final EBC2024 competition representative.

The EBC event is organized by the European Blues Union (EBU), whose main task is to promote European blues. This blues competition is an important and meaningful event for a band that wants to gain recognition in Europe.