

CONCERT REVIEW : A posse of blues cooks - Mark Hummel's Harmonica Blowout, an all-star franchise event, returned to SOhO on Thursday night with a pack of hot blues harp players under one roof

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A core mission statement of Mark Hummel's Harmonica Blowout project, in operation since 1991, could be described fairly simply. Mr. Hummel, a distinctly hot and tradition-respectful blues harp master himself, uses his unique, rotating all-star harp format to bring some of the world's finest blues harp maestros under one roof for a night. The stated and unstated goal, then, is to systematically raise the roof with steamy blues power.

Mission accomplished, Thursday night at SOhO. Returning to the venue after a "Blowout" last year, but with a different cast of characters, Mr. Hummel is the ringleader and organizer of this traveling, morphing circus. This night's model, a generous cultural outing of basically three chords for three hours, included the great Rod Piazza (with his soulful pianist wife Honey), Chicagoans Billy Branch and Sugar Blue and former Santa Barbaran Mitch Kashmar. Mr. Hummel may be the situation-maker, very well plugged into the blues world, but he is also mighty impressive in his own right.

Mr. Hummel was arriving on the heels of a personal high point in his career, after the release of his fine new album, "Back Porch Music," an "unplugged" album of old favorites. At SOhO, he had his solid group as the house band all night, featuring stingingly good guitarini by Rusty Zinn (who also plays reggae, as another of his musical alter personalities). For his portion of the evening, Mr. Hummel called on songs by old masters Little Walter and Sonny Boy Williamson, and sprinkled funky spices on "Funky Way to Treat Somebody" (introducing the



Billy Branch brought his Chicago style to Mark Hummel's Harmonica Blowout at SOhO. Mr. Hummel, below, also rocked the mic on Thursday. NIK BLASKOVICH / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



song by telling the dance floor "if you can't dance to this one, I don't know. Head over to Arthur Murray").

Of keen local interest was the evening's first "gun," Mr. Kashmar, a fabulous player who lived and played in Santa Barbara for many years, as the kingpin of the Pontiax. He moved to Los Angeles, and his own bandleader career has blossomed, along with a choice steady gig in the Lee Oscar role for the band War.

With his short but punchy set at SOhO, Mr. Kashmar showed what the fuss was about. Possibly with tongue-in-cheek, he dug into the chugging, barrelhousing, rough-housing of "Too Many Cooks" (the posse of blues harp "cooks" this night added plenty to the overall success of the musical stew). Mr. Kashmar took a slight jazz turn, as well, on Wes Montgomery's tune "Sam Sack," with the harpist pulling off some fancy reed work, with some sliding and bending in and around the standard blues lingo.

Each harp player had his own signature style within the more general vocabulary of this special musical world. Mr. Branch, a naturally charismatic harp player and singer with a traditionalist's touch, made his way through a handful of tunes, by James Cotton and Junior Wells, before diving into the slow, down and dirty blues mode. "We gonna' get it least halfway down the alley," he told the crowd, and later walked into the crowd to "serenade" folks, making joking kissing sounds in the mix of riffing.

After an intermission, Sugar Blue (best known by the general public for his harmonica work on the Rolling Stones' "Miss You"), was the most showboating player of the lot, issuing super-charged playing even when a cooler head might have prevailed. His solos tended to be fast, high and nervously ornate.

No such approach is heard from the masterful and measured — and suitably crazed, at times — Mr. Piazza, who closed out the succession of mini-sets on this night, and stirred up memories of his powerful show at Warren Hall last year, via the Santa Barbara Blues Society. It was a pleasure, too, to hear some juicy blues piano, by Honey.

Bringing the long harp-heated evening to a loose and raucous finale, all harmonica players on board gathered under the aegis of a fitting blues classic, the old Muddy Waters hit "Got My Mojo Working." Swapping solos and demonstrating the common prowess but stylistic distinctions between them, they steadily upped the mojo at SOhO on this night. At the same time, they manifested the promise of Mr. Hummel's ongoing blues medicine show adventure.