

Sugaray Rayford replaces Kenny Neal as Blues Heaven headliner

A two-meter powerhouse of soul, gospel and hard-swinging blues takes over the Friday headlining slot on 2 October.

Sugaray Rayford replaces Kenny Neal, who has had to cancel due to illness. Blues Heaven wishes Kenny Neal a speedy recovery and hopes to welcome him and the band back to Frederikshavn next year.

Blues Heaven Festival celebrates its 20th anniversary at Arena Nord in Frederikshavn on 2-3 October.

The American soul and blues singer thus returns to Frederikshavn as Friday's headliner.

Sugaray Rayford was Grammy-nominated in 2020 for the album "Somebody Save Me" in the Best Contemporary Blues Album category. At the Blues Music Awards, he was named Soul Blues Male Artist of the Year in both 2019 and 2020, as well as B.B. King Entertainer of the Year in 2020. The album "In Too Deep" won Soul Blues Album of the Year in 2023, and his latest release is 2024's "Human Decency".

The singer is bringing the same line-up as on his previous visit. This will be his third appearance at Blues Heaven, following his debut in 2017 and a headlining slot in 2022.

That earlier visit produced an unexpected sequel the festival had not planned: Norwegian multi-instrumentalist J.T. Lauritsen was in the audience as a guest and ended up on stage with Rayford. This year, they are once again on the same festival bill - this time as artists in their own right. Lauritsen performs with The Buckshot Hunters, who in 2026 won a Blues Music Award in the International Blues Album category for "Still Be Friends" - the first European band ever to do so.

"There were eight weeks to go until the anniversary when Friday suddenly opened up, and there was only one name on my list. After nearly 40 years in blues, I know how rare it is to encounter a singer who can change the energy in a room with the very first note. I have seen what happens when Sugaray and the band take the stage. He has the gravitas, the presence and that special connection between stage and audience that cannot be planned. Those are the nights you remember," says Peter Astrup, artistic director and founder of Blues Heaven Festival.

Saturday's Arena Stage headliner is James Hunter Six. For more than four decades, James Hunter has been a prominent figure in rhythm & blues and soul. MOJO Magazine has called him "The United Kingdom's Greatest Soul Singer", and the Grammy nomination for "People Gonna Talk" cemented his international standing. In 2026, he also resumed his collaboration with Van Morrison on the duet "Ain't That a Trip" - their first recording together in 30 years.

The 20th anniversary brings together 81 musicians from 13 nations and presents 14 concerts on the Arena Stage and in the Blues Hall.

In 2025, the festival's audience came from 15 countries.

Practical information

There is music at Arena Nord on both days from 15:00 to 24:00. On Thursday 1 October, the festival opens with Blues at Maskinhallen, a separate club-format event at Skolegade 8, Frederikshavn.

Weekend pass (Friday + Saturday, both stages): DKK 1,295 in advance, DKK 1,395 at the door

Single-day ticket (Friday or Saturday, both stages): DKK 895 in advance, DKK 995 at the door

Blues at Maskinhallen (Thursday, city-center club format): DKK 295 in advance, DKK 345 at the door

Tickets and information: bluesheaven.dk

About Blues Heaven Festival

Blues Heaven Festival is an international, multi-award-winning blues and soul festival celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. In 2018, the French magazine Zicazic named it "International Festival of the Year". The same year, Peter Astrup received "Hoochie Coochie Man of the Year" at the Danish Music Awards - Blues. In 2020, he received the "Keeping the Blues Alive Award" from The Blues Foundation in Memphis, was elected to the foundation's board in 2021, and received the European Blues Union's "Behind the Scenes Award" in 2022.

Press contact

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