

BLUESFEST

35,000 music lovers savour festival's biggest opening night

BY LYNN SAXBERG

Van Morrison showed little of his curmudgeonly streak as he breezed through a crowd-pleasing set on opening night of the Ottawa Bluesfest. It was a glorious christening for the spacious new site on the grounds of the Canadian War Museum at LeBreton Flats.

The audience spanned acres, from the hordes of lawnchairs packed tightly together in front of the sound board, all the way back to open grassy patches where hippie moms danced with their children.

Though he said few words to the audience and kept his eyes closed through most of his performance, which are often two signs of a shy performer, Morrison expressed himself through his music, the song selection letting us know he was pleased to be back in the nation's capital after something like 40 years.

His last concert here was a coffee-house gig at Le Hibou in the 1960s.

But evidently he wasn't thrilled enough to play an encore. The concert ended, like clockwork, at 9 p.m., exactly 90 minutes after it started. There was a brief lull before the hypnotic strains of Morrison's final song, *Gloria*, were blasted out of our brains by the screaming guitar of Elmer Ferrer's opener, a full-throttle cover of *Immigrant Song*.

On the Rogers stage across the plaza, the Cuban guitar-slinger was set up and ready to go moments after Morrison departed.

gan, violin, banjo and pedal steel, along with the usual bass, drums and guitar.

While their individual contributions bolstered the songs, their strength as a band contributed a large part to the quality of the concert.

Morrison might have seemed a little one-dimensional if not for the talent and diversity of his band members' playing.

There was a sense of relief to realize that Morrison was aiming to please, musically.

His song selection offered plenty of familiar material to groove along to, and one of his most popular songs, *Moondance*, made a great icebreaker early in the set.

Not all of it was his, as Morrison also likes to tackle classic material, injecting plenty of blues into *Baby Please Don't Go*. A vintage vibe permeated last night's performance, which started with a loose, unhurried meander through *Talk Is Cheap*.

In a grey suit that lent an air of dignity to his pudgy frame, his face was all but hidden under oversized glasses and the brim of a straw fedora.

The soulful brass and earthy organ brightened up *All Work No Play*, while a summery banjo added colour to *Bright Side of the Road*.

Morrison also included the lightly funky *Cleaning Windows*, the heavenly *Into The Mystic*, and big bold Jackie Wilson *Said (I'm in Heaven When You Smile)*, and his tongue-in-cheek anti-drinking chant, *Stop Drinking* (it is

