I first heard these guys last summer at the Prairie Dog Blues Fest in Wisconsin. I wanted to see if they lived up to their name, and they do. I saw them again last year at the Rocking Rib Fest in Davenport, but last Friday I only had to roll down the hill to The District to catch my fellow man of the cloth, the Rev. Raven.

So when did Wisconsin become such a hotbed of great music? The Youngblood Brass Band from Madison keeps showing up, about half the lineup at the recent Hornucopia was from there-abouts, and Rev. Raven and the Chain Smokin' Altar Boys have been voted Best Wisconsin Blues Band two years running. We've been getting lots of impressive talent down here from America's Dairyland, and not a polka band in the lot.

Opening for Rev. Raven was Corporate Rock, which I blew off in order to head across the creek for a set of Shane Johnson's Blue Train. I understand Corporate Rock is real good, considering their ages all added together wouldn't qualify them for a senior-citizen discount at Denny's. But hey, Corporate "Rock" or SJ's "Blue" Train? For me, that's a no-brainer.

Ah, but that's not what the RCR was paying me for – yes, they pay me, go figure – so I was back at RIBCO in time to see the Rev. and his Altar Boys jump into the Eddie Clearwater classic "Blues Hangout," followed by a smoking Albert King cover. Up next was an original, "Handyman," featuring Chuck Might's heavy left on the boogie piano.

That's about the point at which I quit taking notes, or at least the point at which my notes quit being legible. The remainder of the evening consisted of a balanced mix of skin-tight covers and polished originals. Rev. Raven handled vocals while he took the crowd to church with his Strat, allowing plenty of room for Chuck's impressive work on piano and organ. Drummer Spencer Panosh and bassist Drew Rittgers provided some nice grooves amidst their no-frills bottom. Had I not seen them before, I might not have even missed their terrific harp player, Cadillac Pete Rahn, who was out sick.

The band has been playing together for a while, and their depth showed in their ability to offer a solid performance while missing a large part of the band. And despite a rather small crowd – okay, make that a pathetically small crowd – we managed to get them back for a sweet Elmore James number as an encore.

So, let's re-cap: Band, great. Venue, great. Sound, great. Weather, great. Crowd, sucked. Same thing the following night when another bunch of cheeseheads, Three Beers from Dubuque, rolled into RIBCO. They got a six-piece horn section, they got a fretless bass guitar, they do Tower of Power, and they do it real funky. Was the crowd light? Well, the horn section, including two slide trombones, did a walk through the crowd on one number and didn't even manage to impale anybody. I'm assuming you can identify TBFB fans by the proliferation of eye patches.

And Liquid Soul a coupla weeks back? Sad, really sad. They're currently heading for Japan, where they're gonna play to, like, a million fans paying, like, a million yen apiece, and there weren't more than a couple hundred of us who turned out to see 'em in their own backyard. I'm tellin' ya folks, the boom times ain't gonna last forever. When the economy heads south, and

you know it eventually will, live music will be one of the first things to go. Club owners know they can hire a DJ to spin that trunk-thumping stuff for next to nothing, and most of ’em are still overpaid. Can’t handle that $4 cover? The sound at these outdoor shows is almost as good on the other side of the snow fence. I’ll bet you don’t tip your waiter, either. See ya up front.