

EasyWeek

The South Bay Entertainment and Dining Guide

Insomniacs swing into Boogaloo

Portland-based band evokes toe-tapping and foot-stomping in their live appearances

by Mark McDermott

The cover of the Insomniacs' first and thus far only album, "Left Coast Blues" shows a big eye, a little bloodshot, but very wide open. It's a good illustration of the Portland, Oregon-based blues band's fresh take on what can sometimes be a weary genre.

These are happy blues. When the Insomniacs are in the house, there is rarely a droopy eye to be found, nor are there many limbs that aren't shaking or shimmying. These are toe-tapping, foot-stomping, swinging blues. As bassist Dean Mueller noted in an interview this week, furniture gets rearranged when the band gets rolling.

"Tables get moved," Mueller said. "You just cannot not dance to it."

The band is led by 25-year-old Vyasa Dodson, a guitarist with some elegant chops who also happens to write melodic, inventive, and downright snappy songs. As "Left Coast Blues" demonstrates, Dodson has listened far and wide - there is a strong jazz vibe in his playing, a little bit of sweet doo-wop here and there, with even a nice dollop of surf guitar thrown in for good measure.

But make no mistake, this is vintage blues, albeit with a few fresh twists. Take the song "I Got Money," which turns the standard blues and rock assumption sideways - usually, the deal being presented is a singer who doesn't have much money, but has everything else to make the object of his love happy. Not so with the Insomniacs.

*"I can't sing, I can't dance
And I never been much at romance
But I got money that I like to spend on you
I'll buy your clothes, and fancy cars
We'll be the first lovers on Mars,
Because I got money..."*

Turning things on their ears is kind of an ongoing theme with the Insomniacs. They aren't what you might think of when you think of a blues band, but their sound actually harkens back to what was known once upon a time as "West Coast Swing," a jump blues precursor to Rock N' Roll that swept the west coast in the '40s and '50s. It's fitting that the Insomniacs are coming to Hermosa's Café Boogaloo, only a block away from the where the famed Insomniac Café and the Lighthouse (in its jazz heyday) were located, places where hip cats certainly did swing circa 1956.

These days, Portland, Ore., is a musical epicenter in its own right. The city has more quality music venues per square mile than any city north of New Orleans, and its blues scene has become something that rivals more traditional blues havens, such as Chicago and Kansas City. It's an environment rich with musicians, one that fos-

ters healthy competition as well as great opportunities - Mueller, for example, has played with such blues greats as Honeyboy Edwards, Louisiana Red and Curtis Delgado.

"I played with great people when it was probably before my time to do so," Mueller said. "That really accelerates things. "When Curtis Delgado is at a jam and you play with him, that does a lot for your confidence, and your ability to just listen and fly with it."

Mueller and Dodson formerly played together in a band called the Push Rods when Dodson, who was only 21, started to hear those old blue sounds.

"I'd just moved to Portland, from California, and I saw these guys doing this West Coast Swing stuff," he said. "I couldn't even fathom it. I had no idea what they were doing, but I spent the next four years trying to listen to as much of that kind of music as I could....There is a lot to draw from a lot of these unknown guys, a lot of inspiration in those old records."

Dodson began writing his own songs, and the Insomniacs were rounded out with two experienced musicians, drummer Dave Melyan and keyboard/piano player Alex Shakeri (whose boogie-woogie romps and bluesy organ riffs really fill out the band's sound). They quickly made their mark on Portland, which isn't an easy thing to do.

"The fact you have all these great players in Portland just builds on itself," Mueller said. "It just creates a scene, and the competition is really high. If you want a bunch of people to come to your show, you've got to be good, because people can see blues all the time anywhere and a lot of times for free. You've really got to be worth it, and something different."

They recorded "Left Coast Blues" in Mueller's house, released it themselves, and soon found themselves getting ample airplay on local radio stations. Within a few months, Delta Groove Music came calling with a record deal. The band soon found themselves playing at the "What Love Is" movie premiere at The Avalon in Hollywood and touring the coast on the strength of "Left Coast Blues."

It's easy to see how this record attracted so much immediate attention. There's nothing pretentious going on here - no big boundaries are being crossed, no deep insights being gleaned - just every single song ripping along of its own accord. It leads off with an unstoppable groove on "Stick Around" that should come with a warning - don't play it in your car, because you'll either run through a red light or get a speeding ticket as your foot abuses the pedal - and proceeds with a verve rarely captured on modern blues records. There are a couple weird old gems - the



The Insomniacs play at Café Boogaloo on Friday night.

"Stuttering Blues," which according to Dodson comes from an old band called the Five Scamps - but nine of the 11 songs are originals, ranging from a surf-guitar influenced "Crime Scene" to the classic R&B sound of "Serves Me Right."

Then there's the rollicking "Shake the Chandelier," which Dodson describes as "a not-so-subtle homage to when you've been gone a long time and what's on your mind when you come back is shaking the chandelier...That's usually how it goes, anyways, for me."

The band's playing is absolutely impeccable throughout - yes, it's weird to describe any kind of blues as impeccable, but these four gentlemen from the Northwest deserve the adjective, because there is a certain button-upped, spiffy quality to their groove. It makes you feel like wearing a pinstripe suit with big lapels, a floppy hat and shiny shoes (or is that just me?). Dodson is sweet-voiced, his guitar tone is beautifully clean (he plays a vintage Telecaster that manages to sound like a hollow-body on occasion), and his solos are incisive yet rip-roaring. This is good stuff.

You've got to hand it to Steve Roberts, the owner/manager/talent scout for Café Boogaloo: he's got big ears. Boogaloo has established itself as an enduring, leading light in the local music scene because you pretty much know if a band is coming to Boogaloo - even if you've never heard of them - they are going to be worth listening to.

And in this case, dancing, with your eyes wide open.

The Insomniacs play Café Boogaloo in Hermosa Beach Nov. 2. Showtime 9:30 p.m. \$10. EasyReader November 11, 2007

Barfly

by DebL

Celeb Sighting: Tony Romo, quarterback for my Dallas Cowboys, was spotted at The Shade Hotel last Saturday, Oct. 27. I wish someone would have called me while he was still there, I have a few pointers for him. Although he is playing much better this year and showing some leadership skills, I'm with ex-coach Bill Parcells who said last year, "Let's not get the anointing oil out just yet." Maybe that's why no one called me until after he left...

Now Open: 12th & Highland, MB, in the ever-changing locale that once housed the infamous 12th Street Grill; Crème de la Crepe deux, Catalina Ave, RB, in the space previously occupied by Riviera Wine Cellar. Owner Bruno Baio, who has turned Crème de la Crepe une into "le bijou d'Hermosa," is also remodeling the space on PCH, RB, once home to Le Beaujolais/Blu/Rae's to be opened mid-November as le Saint Rafael. Call the new Crème/Crepe at 310.540.8811 for more info...

Coming Soon: Mucho, Manhattan Ave, MB, in the space previously occupied by Michi. New owner Mike Zislis is the man behind Rock N' Fish and The Shade Hotel so look for this joint to be uber-cool. Coming Along: Mama D's, Hermosa Ave, HB, in the space previously occupied by Subway looks like it is almost ready to open. Should prove a welcome addition to Hermosa...

Closed: Bambooz, in the parking lot behind Scotty's on The Strand, HB. Owner Pat Miller's food was so good, he kept getting called away to cater for special sporting events and studio shoots - Yo Pat! Don't forget us little people when you are all rich and famous...

Special Coverage: Check out myfoxla.com to see a clip of the Oct. 15 Good Day LA Live story on Shellback Tavern, Manhattan Beach Boulevard, MB. Last week's "The Guide," a new weekend supplement to the *LA Times*, quoted Actress Alyson Hannigan of "American Pie" and ABC's "How I Met Your Mother," describing a fun "date night" as a class at Chefmakers Cooking Academy, Manhattan Beach. For more info on Chefmakers check out chefmakersonline.com.

Down to Size: Buca di Beppo, PCH, RB, known for its family-sized portions made to share, is introducing "Buca Mio," single portions and "Buca Small," for those who want to share with just two or three amici. Call 310.540.3246 for more info and if you didn't get your \$10 gift card in the mail (it was sent out to local South Bay residents), tell them you want it immediately! The offer is only good through Dec. 9. Check out bucadibepo.com for more info...

Compare & Contrast: I was dining at Hibachi, Pier Ave, HB, with a few friends recently and we were talking with (ok, drinking with) Bob, the owner, about the difference between his Mai-Tai recipe versus the Navy Grog. Basically the \$6.50 Navy Grog is the Mai-Tai recipe (three types of rum - dark, light and coconut - with fruit juices), plus a floater of Black Sharp Rum. The \$5 Margarita is made with Sauza Gold tequila, Triple Sec and "Dr. Swami & Bone Daddy's Margarita Mix" instead of Sweet & Sour. Hibachi has a simple menu but the food is consistently good - which is a feat for the South Bay. Call 310.379.6456 for more info...

Questions? Comments? Contact Barfly DebL@aol.com. ER