

The Blues Takes a Sea Cruise

The Legendary Rhythm & Blues Band's Commanding Performance

San Francisco guitarist Tommy Castro didn't plan on starting the next blues/rock supergroup. It sort of fell together on a sea cruise.

What emerged from the high seas is a band and an album that brings to mind the great blues eras, when there were jam sessions in all the clubs and the rule was simple: Don't get up, if you can't get down.

Castro, who has put out a dozen recordings since 1993 as the frontman for one of the hardest touring bands in the USA, has been a fixture on the Legendary Blues Cruise, with its nightly jam sessions.

It was an unlikely place for these hot downtown grooves, an ocean liner in the Caribbean. But the album that was released this week, *Command Performance*, on Delta Groove music, shows that the blues can come to life anyplace people who love it come together to get their fix.

"I started thinking, we have to find a way to take this on land," says Castro. "I wanted to show people who don't get to go and are thinking about it, what it's all about."

So with inspiration from Delta Groove founder Randy Chortkoff and Blues Cruise founder Roger Naber, Castro began calling some of the people he'd most enjoy jamming with.

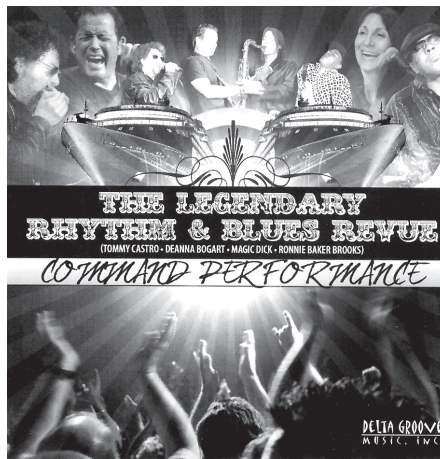
The lineup is a who's who of modern blues musicians, each of whom fronts his or her own band: Ronnie Baker Brooks on guitar and vocals; Deanna Bogart on piano and vocals; and Magic Dick on harmonica and vocals.

Back that up with Castro's road veteran band and special guests including Curtis Salgado, Marcia Ball and Elvin Bishop, and you have pure blues magic.

"I always talked to other artists about doing this but I could never make it happen," says Baker Brooks, the son of legendary Chicago bluesman Lonnie Brooks, who saw a lifetime of blues jams among his father's pals like Buddy Guy, Eric Clapton and Hubert Sumlin.

What happened was the formation of a camaraderie and musical kinship that none of the artists expected. They bonded on the road and on stage, the sum, greater than the parts, rolling like a tour bus across the country.

"Everybody's personalities and vibe made it



work," says Brooks, who at 40 says he's old in the rock world, but a young blues man. "Being able to take a back seat and be cool with that, and when you have the front seat, knowing how to handle it."

The disc released this week on Delta Groove Records echoes what fans saw on stage: each member fronted the band through some songs of their choice, and then they ended the night, as they did on the cruise, with stretched out jams.

It's the kind of musical cross-pollination that musicians say is getting harder and harder to find. Clubs close earlier; people work hard and have to get to jobs; they don't drink as much; and bands criss-cross the country on tours, like ships in the night.

There are too few places for musicians to meet, as they did in Chicago, or on Beale Street in Memphis in the old days.

The cruise rekindled the old days.

"You have all these musicians with a bunch of blues fans and alcohol and no one has to drive and no one has to do anything but party," says Baker Brooks, who has been playing the cruise for more than a decade. "It was a hit. I was jamming from 1 a.m. to 7 or 8 a.m."

Maryland keyboard and sax player Deanna Bogart wasn't sure how it would all pan out when she got the invitation. Her music skews more to jazz, a mix she calls "bluesion" and she wasn't sure where she'd fit in with these Chicago and West Coast inspired players.

"Some of us didn't even know each other," she says. "But early on, all of a sudden I realized we weren't components: we were one band. And

it was a weird feeling. It meant the music was king. When that feeling struck me, it was wonderful. We were all supporting each other from very different quadrants of the blues world."

For Detroit native Bogart it brought to mind Kansas City jam sessions of the 1930s, where "one song would go three or four hours. If you repeated yourself, you were kicked out."

It was, she says, a fertile atmosphere for music, and an important element in taking the blues further.

For Castro, who got into blues through rock supergroups such as Cream and the Allman Brothers, this was like a return to the sixties, when bands jammed all night at San Francisco's Fillmore auditorium.

"I think people are ready for that kind of organic music again," he says. "Back then, people would come to those jams and it was like a big light bulb would go off. They were so f---ing happy."

"Occasionally there is a train wreck, but without that risk, it wouldn't be exciting. It's like watching cliff diving. If there wasn't a chance they'd go into the rocks, it wouldn't be as exciting."

Castro was especially excited to join up with one of his rock idols, Magic Dick, of the J. Geils Band.

"I'm a huge J. Geils fan," he says. "To me they were right up there with the Rolling Stones."

All the musicians were surprised that Dick, who has toured giant stadiums and been a staple on MTV, was such a student of Chicago blues.

"He's a harmonica virtuoso," says Castro, who got Dick to team up on Geils classics "Give it to Me" and "Looking for a Love."

In his own set, Dick adds some Little Walter, and his own "Whammer Jammer," caught live on this disc through a vocal microphone.

"The thing I've always liked about the blues is that it's a structured framework within which there is a lot of room for improvisation," says the Boston boogiemeister. "I think improvisation is one of the things that makes music come to life."

That's what happens on "Command Performance," recorded live on tour stops across the country.

The audience gets up, and these players get down. Way down.