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MUSIC

Ocean's bluer than blue on this sea cruise

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It was nearing 5 a.m. and still the veteran virtuosos on stage, as well as the diehard fans on the pool deck-cum-dance floor, couldn't stop rocking. Literally: Swells were causing the MS Zuiderdam, the Holland America ship hosting this blues bacchanal, to pitch from side to side. The swaying crab walk adopted by revelers under the influence of wine, waves and song became the unofficial dance of the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise last month.

Part party boat, part moving festival, the "blues cruise" is the flagship, so to speak, of a growing trend: music-themed excursions.

"The whole idea of traveling and hearing good music at the same time is very appealing," says Miami resident Bob Wilder, aka Piano Bob, who has been a passenger on various blues cruises since the '90s. "Moving, actually getting somewhere, and enjoying something you really care about at the same time is very attractive."

The performers may enjoy the cruise even more than the cruisers.

"This is the most fun I've ever had," says Tito Jackson, a surprise guest on board the blues cruise. The brother of Michael and erstwhile guitar player in the Jackson 5 and the Jacksons returned to playing his first music, blues, a few years ago. "This is for big kids like us."

Music cruises are becoming big business as well as big fun. For the cruise industry, they provide a new source of niche marketing. The Zuiderdam, a young ship with multiple performance spaces and bars, hosted three in a row in January: one for fans of Americana music, hosted by artist Delbert McClinton; one for smooth jazz; and the blues cruise.

"I think you're going to see it more and more," says the ship's guest relations manager, Sissel Bergersen. "It's a great place to have it."

For the struggling music industry, music cruises offer a new, lucrative kind of venue, especially for genres shut out of the commercial airwaves. During the four years since it formed out of the ashes of an earlier venture (the Ultimate Rhythm and Blues Cruise), the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise has sold out progressively larger ships, culminating in the Zuiderdam's 1800 berths. Prices range from approximately \$1,150 to \$4,250 per person, including food and music.

Blues cruise founder Roger Naber helped launch the Jam Cruise, for jam bands, a couple years ago. There's also a Rock Boat and one featuring Irish bands. Olivia cruises combine two travel trends: they're havens for lesbians and for lovers of women's music.

Music cruises are extensions of the growing festival circuit. "There's getting to be too many land festivals," says Josh Moore, talent buyer for the Jam Cruise. "With a boat, you don't have to deal with rain and mud, and walking from stage to stage, and Port a Potties."

All three Jam Cruises to date have sold out; the '06 excursion is almost full, even though no dates or performers have been announced, says Moore. "Bands beg to come back."

IN THE FLESH

For blues fans, particularly enthusiasts of the electric blues of the '50s and '60s, the blues cruise is paradise with propellers. Not only do they get to see such stalwarts of the form as Taj Mahal, Dr. John and Aubrey Ghent several times in intimate quarters; they can also hang out with them poolside, eat with them in the dining hall, or even perform with them at various Pro-Am (professional and amateur) jams. There's no backstage on board, no laminate labyrinth.

"There's a family vibe on this ship," says Faber. "It's for people who want to be around people who like the music they do, who want to be part of a scene."

Most of the musicians relish the opportunity to mingle with their audience.

"You get to communicate with the folks, hear what's on their minds," says zydeco bandleader Chubby Carrier. "This is the best time I've had in my 16 years as a professional musician."

The cruise gives musicians a rare chance to spend time, and perform, with each other. All-star jams are scheduled from 1 to 5 every morning, and there are many other impromptu ones. On the cruise's last night, Virginia artist/scholar Corey Harris added a grave, stately baritone and evocative picking to the jazz/rock/blues fusion of gifted guitarist Derek Trucks. Amid the usual bar-band-esque showmanship, it was a truly original musical moment.

"The cruise provides an opportunity to meet and play with some great musicians" says Fiona Boyes, an Australian artist. "I'm musically overstimulated and inspired."

If you don't love the blues, you may hate it by week's end -- especially if your room is under the pool deck where the all-night jams take place. It wasn't hell on highwater (for me, that would be the smooth jazz cruise). But sometimes, it became a Blues Brother karaoke caricature. The blues cruise draws a particular devoted clientele: an abundance of portly, middle-aged gentlemen with ponytails. After stops in Tortola and St. Maarten (bad weather aborted the Grand Turk visit), a distressing number of them became gentlemen with braids.

For many of the customers, who come every year, it's also a booze cruise. People decorate their cabin doors with inflatable guitars, CD covers and confetti, a regression to dorm days. There's a Mardi Gras night, a pirate night, a pajamas night. The usual cruise-ship rules are left ashore: no dress code, no assigned dinner seatings. "It's come as you are, do as you please," Carrier says.

Not every musician loves the confined quarters of a ship. Dr. John spent most of the blues cruise in his room, still burned from a decades-old experience, when he got strip-searched by customs once they landed. "I just want to sleep," he said.

LONG, STRANGE TRIP

There's an irony to all this light-hearted bluesin'; "the blues," after all, is a synonym for depression. One could argue that the ultimate American roots music, the building block of jazz, rock and hip-hop, was indeed born on ships in the Atlantic. But it's a hell of a long way from the Middle Passage to the blues cruise.

Harris, whose efforts to retrace the steps of the African diaspora were documented in Martin Scorsese's '03 PBS blues series, shrugs off the irony. "Music changes over time. There's a large part of the blues that is and always has been entertainment."

"Blues is a way of making yourself feel better," says San Francisco bandleader Tommy Castro. "It's medicine for what ails you, not the cause."

Trucks, from Jacksonville, relishes the chance to essentially workshop with other artists. He sees the blues cruise as an antidote to the watered-down pop market -- and maybe a chance to have one's horizons broadened, something both travelers and music-lovers typically seek.

"You can simplify music and get through to as many people as possible, or dig in and if people come, they come. That's our attitude," Trucks says.

"Any time pop and mainstream gets too lightweight, there's always a reaction from artists and musicians. Music and literature are ways people see other sides of life. My goal as a musician is to help people see things differently."