

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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At the 2010 Blues Music Awards in May, Tommy Castro and his bandmates walked away with four awards: band of the year, contemporary blues male artist, contemporary blues album (for *Hard Believer*), and the big one -- B.B. King Entertainer of the Year.

In a recent phone interview, Castro sounded genuinely grateful and surprised. "You need a shot in the arm," he said. "It was a big night for us." And with a charming lack of vanity, Castro offered two explanations for his four-for-four night specifically, and for his success generally.

"I got opportunities to have a career playing blues, I think, before I was really ready for it," he said. "When Blind Pig signed me [in the mid-1990s], I didn't have any songs. ... I've been learning how to do this while I was doing it. ... I think that over a period of time we've gotten a little bit better at making records."

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He credited having a good band, a good producer, and good songwriter partners. "My talent might lie in surrounding myself with all the right people to help me do what I do best," he said. "I have my little thing that I do. I'm a fairly proficient songwriter, I'm a good singer, and a good guitar player. I don't think I'm great at any of those things. ... I'll take all the help I can get."

The California-based Castro will have plenty of help at the IH Mississippi Valley Blues Festival, as the Tommy Castro Band will be backing separate sets by its leader, guitarist Debbie Davies, harmonica player Magic Dick, and shouter Sista Monica as part of the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Revue. That closes the festival's bandshell stage on Sunday and will culminate with a jam featuring all the artists.

Jams have long been a part of the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise and its earlier incarnation, but it was Castro's idea to try it on land as part of a tour.

"Some of the best stuff out of people happens under those circumstances," Castro said. "And also there's the possible train wreck that could happen at any time. We're all professionals, and it's not likely to happen, but it *can* happen at any time. ... There is a chance, the possibility for things to go terribly wrong at any second. That makes it exciting. Why do people enjoy watching cliff-diving, or any other dangerous sport? ... That element of danger involved. ..."

"I saw the look on people's faces when the jam would happen [on the cruises], especially when the really great shit would happen. I thought, 'There's got to be a way to create something like this on the road.'"

The tours started a few years ago with Magic Dick, pianist Deanna Bogart, and guitarist Ronnie Baker Brooks. Castro said the goal is always "a well-rounded show. Everybody did something different, but when we jammed together, there was some magic there in that original lineup."

While Castro's band gets quite a workout, he said it's simply good business. "It adds dates to the calendar, basically," he said. "You have a kind of music that appeals to a pretty small section of the population. Not everybody in the world is a blues fan. You've got a strong following, a faithful following ... . We offer people a lot -- a really strong show to get them to

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come out. ... They get a chance to see four national acts at once, one night. We're giving them a lot for their money."

Make no mistake: Castro is a draw all on his own. In addition to this year's awards haul, Castro won the contemporary-blues-album and B.B. King accolades at the Blues Music Awards in 2008, and *Hard Believer* earned strong reviews. About.com called it "a white-hot collection of spirited, unpretentious performances, each song approached by Castro and his flamethrower band with the ferocity of a hungry heavyweight-class prizefighter."

Half the songs on *Hard Believer* are originals, and I generally prefer those to the covers. "Monkey's Paradise" has a particularly strong groove, "Make It Back to Memphis" is joyous roadhouse, and "Trimmin' Fat" has a light touch with the sad realities of the economy as well as the live-music business: "He could hardly even look me in the face / And he said, 'Karaoke really packs this place.'"

Castro and his band nail Allen Toussaint's "Victims of the Darkness," with great alchemy between the horns, the guitar, and Castro's roughly warm voice -- which the All Music Guide compared to "a cross between Delbert McClinton, James Brown, and Bob Seger."

And there's no denying that Castro and his band play the covers with conviction, whether the lounge-jazz strains of Jeff Turmes' "The Trouble with Soul" or the Godfather of Soul-like treatment of Wilson Pickett's "Ninety-Nine & One Half."

Castro admits that many people -- including Bruce Iglauer, head of Castro's new label Alligator -- advised him against doing Bob Dylan's "Gotta Serve Somebody" because it had been overdone. But Castro was undeterred. "I remember hearing Bob Dylan do it, and thinking to myself, 'Look at those big gaping holes there where there should be a ... big Albert King guitar lick in between those choruses.'"

The singer and guitarist has certainly earned the deference to make records however he pleases. And in Alligator, he's found a label with a refreshingly artist-centric attitude about the music business. Castro said that Iglauer understands that concerts are the lifeblood of not only performers but also their labels: "The way to sell the most records is to get people to my shows."