Longtime fans of Rod Piazza know that the pinnacle for the harmonica-player and leader of The Mighty Flyers came with 1994’s Live at B.B. King’s Blues Club. After all, what better way to capture the blistering showmanship of this band than with a live record? “It’s kind of a hallmark album for me,” Piazza said.

So it’s a high compliment indeed when people tell him that the group’s latest album, *Keepin’ It Real* (released by Blind Pig in May), stands up well to that classic – and it’s a studio offering. It’s an even bigger rave to say that Piazza’s playing rivals that on his solo album *Harpburn*, from 1985.

The new record, produced by Piazza and his keyboardist wife Honey, “sounds like what we sound like on the bandstand,” he said. All the cuts on the album are first or second takes, with few overdubs beyond the vocals. As Piazza says in his liner notes, “The only polish here is from nights on the road performing together and reacting to each other.”

“Too much time and too many overdubs take away the live feel,” he told me last week. “You lose some of that spontaneity.”

The band features a new guitarist, Henry Carvajal, and a new drummer, Paul Vincent Fasulo, since The Mighty Flyers’ last record, 2001’s *Beyond the Source*. (Longtime Flyers bassist Bill Stuve rounds out the sound.) “Every cat plays different,” Piazza said. Carvajal also sings harmony vocals, which opens up more possibilities for the band, its leader said.

Piazza’s dirty, distorted, and wailing playing jumps right out on the record’s first track, “Big Blues Party,” and never stops. Piazza matches his harmonica with a roughly filtered vocal on Willie Dixon’s “Pretty Thing,” and Carvajal offers a wicked reverbed guitar to transform the track into something that straddles the line between classic and modern. Carvajal also gets a great workout in the instrumental “West Coast Midnight Blues,” while Honey Piazza shines on her own track, the nearly 10-minute “Buzzin’.”

The album also gave Rod Piazza the opportunity to correct some past mistakes. He recorded “Devil’s Foot” and “That’s What She Hollered” with blues guitarist Kid Ramos but was displeased with how the producers handled them; one of the released songs featured a throw-away vocal track with the wrong lyrics. “I was kind of unhappy with the presentation,” Piazza said.

Capturing the live sound isn’t nearly as simple as playing the song live in the studio, though. For one thing, there’s none of the on-stage partying, and no audience to react to. Furthermore, in the studio, Piazza is concentrating on many more components. “The most important thing is not to look to hard” while in the studio, he said. “You can shoot yourself in the foot.”

Keepin’ It Real mimics the live show in more than just the sound. The album is generous – 13 songs and nearly 70 minutes – and it’s sequenced like a show, contrasting tempos and textures, from warm, easy blues to gritty workouts. “I try to mix an album like a mix a set,”

Piazza said, “set it up like I would a show.”

Although the record might not be “polished” in terms of its production, *Keepin’ It Real* mostly traffics in an upbeat, party style of blues, as often led by Honey’s piano as Rod’s harp. It frequently has a laid-back feel that provides a break from the record’s more intense cuts.

The 56-year-old Piazza is certainly happy that the new album is on a new label. Distribution problems plagued the band with Tone-Cool. “I can’t tell you how many stores I walked into and found everybody’s record but mine,” he said. “I’d like to get this record as far out there as it can go.” Distribution and promotion are “better than I’ve ever had with Tone-Cool,” he added.

That’s the main reason he’s so happy with how *Keepin’ It Real* turned out. With better distribution through Blind Pig, *this* will be the record that introduces many people to Piazza. “It’s a strong, strong card to play,” he said.