



all aboard the blues cruise

by DAVE HOEKSTRA

Blues are the facts of life depicted in song. And life never felt this good.

When late Chicago blues legend Willie Dixon talked blues facts in his 1989 biography *I Am the Blues*, he surely never envisioned the Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise. Dixon is the architect of the Led Zeppelin classic “Whole Lotta Love.” The blues cruise is a Whole Lotta Love Boat.

This past January, more than thirty blues acts—many from the Chicago area—boarded Holland America’s *ms Westerdam* in Ft. Lauderdale and set sail for Montego Bay, Jamaica, Grand Cayman, Costa Maya, Mexico, Belize and back to Florida for the Fifth Annual Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise. In a week’s time the performers played seventy sets, conducted workshops, participated in jam sessions and signed autographs. The cruise was sold out, with 1,815 total passengers who represented seventeen countries. The oldest passenger was legendary Chicago bluesman Pinetop Perkins at age 92. The youngest was a six-month-old baby from Austria.

The sea cruise is the brainchild of Roger Naber, former owner of the Grand Emporium in Kansas City. Some of the artists who played this year’s cruise included Bobby “Blue” Bland, Buckwheat Zydeco, Ronnie Baker Brooks, Billy Branch, James Cotton and the salty Millie Jackson.

Naber manages and books the cruise, which is rolling on five consecutive sell-outs. The cruise has become so successful that on October 3-7 he debuts a West Coast version on Holland America’s *ms Zaandam*, tooling from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas. The Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise is the world’s only fully chartered blues cruise on the high seas.

Musicians like the winter cruise because January is a slow month for work, there are no hassles in getting to a gig, and the weather is generally good. Generally. I was along for January’s Legendary cruise, and on Day Two of our journey we hit bad weather along the north coast of Cuba near the lighthouse of Cabo Maisi. Waves were between seven and twelve feet and the ship was sailing thirty knots into strong winds, according to the nautical guide on my stateroom television set that was swinging back and forth. A gust ripped a portion of the roof canvas on an outdoor stage at the ship’s stern. A couple of musicians got seasick. This was rock ‘n’ roll, and it was fun.

THE LEGENDS

Folklorist/bandleader/blues musician Taj Mahal is the patron saint of the blues cruise. He even has a signature cocktail named in his honor: the Taj Mai Tai (\$5.75). January's excursion was Taj's ninth blues cruise. "You don't usually get a chance to see what's happening with an audience," Taj said before a poolside autograph session. "You play a club one night and move on to the next place. Here, it's seven days with grown people that are about the music. They are from all walks of life. We're all living together. This is a break from that whole club style. And I'm all over the boat. I'm doing stuff."

By midweek the ship's daily bulletin reported how fans watched the sun come up with the 63-year-old Taj as blues pianist Mitch Woods held court in the Club 88 piano bar. (Sets begin at 2:30 a.m.) Taj was an unmistakable sight throughout the week, wearing Hawaiian shirts, Panama hats and smoking customized Taj Mahal Montecristo cigars.

A self-taught musician, Taj plays more than twenty instruments, including the National Steel guitar. He had one of the largest bands on the cruise by bringing along a four-piece tuba section. Inside the upscale Vista Lounge (an elegant 870-seat hall which resembles Chicago's Park West), blues traditionalists were greeted with Taj's jovial interpretation of "Ain't Gonna Whistle Dixie," boogie-woogie and the country-soul shuffle of "Mailbox," accented with Taj on harmonica. A dozen women at the front of the stage danced and sipped from tall glow-in-the-dark martini glasses. Taj played three different sets in seven days, and his stylistic expansion of the traditional blues idiom made him one of my cruise favorites, too. It will be just fine with me if I never hear another version of "Sweet Home Chicago" as long as I live.

Another one of my warmest memories of the Legendary cruise was bumping into former Muddy Waters/Earl Hooker sideman Joe Willie "Pinetop" Perkins at the dock in Montego Bay. (Perkins recently relocated from LaPorte, Indiana, to Austin, Texas.) Perkins was staring at the 11-deck, 950-foot-long cruise ship with eyes as wide as the Caribbean sun. Perkins has seen it all. He was born in a sharecropper's shack on a Mississippi cotton plantation. He has played back-ground music for cockfights. He's recorded with Mick Jagger. But he looked at the five-star ship with renewed innocence, and that's what the experience does to everyone. Witness . . .

Guests decorated cabin doors in tributes to New Orleans music, juke joints and past blues cruises. On the cruise's first night my neighbors installed a cardboard tiki bar in front of their door. Since the decoration blocked some of the hallway, the crew made them take it down. It was like living in a University of Illinois dormitory. Another cruiser framed their door with large paper mail slots where passersby could pick up free condoms, lubricants and peppermint candy. You cruise and you choose. At the end of the cruise, a prize is given to the best-designed door. Naber encourages his clients to behave like this. His guide to the cruise is called the *Heathen's Handbook*.

Like any other cruise, the blues cruise has theme nights. However, the themes on the *Westerdam* ranged from "Hoochie Coochie Que . . . Get Your Mojo Grillin'," anchored by a poolside barbecue, to "Come as Your Favorite Musician," where I saw a guy sitting at a bar dressed as Leon Russell with a long white wig, white beard and black top hat.

Unlike any other cruise, guests can wear shorts and T-shirts for the entire trip. And I did. On the blues cruise, the evening tuxedo rental has gone the way of the afternoon newspaper.

THE VESSEL

The *ms Westerdam* is an elegant ship.

She was built in 2004, and cruisers can find respite from the blues in a like-new spa and salon, a health club, an outdoor basketball court, a casino, duty-free shopping, 24-hour free room service, and a library with lots of globes. (I did not see many cruisers in the library.)

The *Westerdam* crew was superb. Staff cleaned and vacuumed day and night. The workers are either very efficient or blues fans are a bunch of pigs. My cabin steward Asep Supendi of Jakarta, Indonesia, was attentive and friendly. Stewards never knocked on the doors of hungover fans to scream, "HOUSEKEEPING!" They always waited until a guest was out of the room to clean. "Nobody programs the ship as intensely as we do," Naber said. "We have shows from four in the afternoon until four in the morning. Holland America seems to understand a charter concept better than other cruise lines we've used."

During the interview, the ship's beverage manager Suzanne de Zwaan interrupted Naber. She said someone broke a glass in a whirlpool. She asked Naber if he wanted to keep the barside whirlpool open the rest of the day. He did. I wondered how often Naber gets flagged down with questions, requests or comments. He answered, "The regular cruisers—we call them 'Repeat Offenders'—they come to me for things all the time."

Approximately fifty percent of the cruisers are returnees. For the January cruise, fans paid anywhere from \$1,150 per person (based on triple occupancy of the cabin), to \$9,000 (based on single occupancy for a penthouse). Prices include all meals, shows and gratuities. Cruisers are on their own for beverages—including soft drinks—port fees and shore excursions. I paid \$29 to go ashore and see more than 1,000 butterflies at the Butterfly Farm in Georgetown, Grand Cayman, but excursions could run as much as \$149 per person for the Dolphin Swim Encounter and Dunn's River Falls outside of Montego Bay.

The blues cruise community includes a regular crew of 800 and 16 temporary production people from Cocoa Beach, Florida. Naber explained, "I live in Kansas City, one of the most landlocked cities in America. We want to deal with production teams that know ship operations. A production team from the Midwest would not know how to handle what happened with that tarp in the wind. And that roof would have been in the ocean."

Naber first recruited his blues cruisers in 1992. His hook line is, "The world is seventy percent water; there must be music out there somewhere." He recalled, "In 1991 I sailed on a group-themed blues cruise on the *Norway*. There were nine quality acts and only seventy blues fans out of 1,700 people. There were no production upgrades on a ship that was built in the 1940s. Bands played through tiny PAs. I knew how to put on an event. [He has also produced the Kansas City Blues & Jazz Festival.] We did our own the following year on a small ship, and we named it 'The Ultimate.'" Naber and his partners chartered an older 800-passenger ship called the *Regal Empress*, launched a website and sent brochures out to a mail list of 5,000 names collected from previous cruises and the Grand Emporium. He said, "I did the talent and my partner [George Myers] at the Grand Emporium ran the cruise. We did seven cruises through 1998, when my partner committed suicide. He left a liability for me. So I backed off and just ran the Grand Emporium for a few years."

In 2000 Naber and his wife Julia attended the Tampa Bay Blues Festival. They ran into nearly 300 landlocked Ultimate cruisers who threw a cruise reunion party on land. "They

YOUNG AT HEART

Neither age nor occupation will keep Blues Cruisers from partying like school kids. The "patron saint of the blues cruise," Taj Mahal [below] is no saint when it comes to dancing till dawn. And 76-year-old Bobby "Blue" Bland [bottom] performs for a packed crowd, suave as ever.





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weren't going to let it die," he said, "so I said I would bring it back." The concept was re-launched in 2002. In May of 2004, Naber sold the historic Grand Emporium after a twenty-year run. It is now a hipster martini bar. Naber spends the rest of his time driving around America in a mural-painted RV in what he calls the Backbone of the Blues Road Tour. The tour travels more than 20,000 miles to more than 20 blues festivals to hype the blues cruise and conduct membership drives for the Memphis-based Blues Foundation, a cruise sponsor.

Another unique aspect of the Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise is the absence of corporate sponsors. Live music is presented in the large indoor Vista Lounge, a more intimate indoor Queen's Lounge, an indoor piano bar, a tenth-floor Crow's Nest with panoramic window views and the outdoor stage at the stern. There were no banners for Budweiser, Coca-Cola or even Holland America at any stage. The only visible advertising was from blues publications.

"It is unique and it is one of the things our cruisers really like about this," Naber said. "There's not a lot of sponsor swag laying around. We want to keep it free of sponsor clutter. These are lifestyle-type people that are getting away from the corporate world. We have people on this boat from 49 states, but the largest representation is from California, because it's a lifestyle. One out of every six cruisers on this ship is a Californian."

Naber books the ship with a keen sensibility. He looks for fan-friendly bands and musicians who enjoy interacting with other musicians as well as fans. He explained, "These musicians didn't get into the blues to be rock stars. They got into the blues because they loved the music. In this element musicians want to play with one another and encourage each other." In fact, just four hours before the stage canvas was cut in the wind like a hot guitar solo, Chicago's Lonnie Brooks joined his son Ronnie Baker Brooks who was leading a jam with ten of the cruise headliners. It was 3:45 in the morning.

THE FAVORITES

WXRT-FM personality Terri Hemmert was aboard her third blues cruise in January. Hemmert recalled her favorite interactive moments from previous blues cruises. "One night I was playing quarter slots with [the late piano player/vocalist] Charles Brown," she said. "He was getting out. The time I went before this [in 2003], Tyrone Davis [who died in 2005] and Otis Clay were booked. The last night of the cruise I was dancing to Tyrone's [1970 hit] 'Turn Back the Hands of Time' and I was on the floor by myself singing the harmony parts. All of a sudden somebody swung me around and said, 'Dance with me,' and it was Tyrone's wife. If you had told me when I was a kid in Ohio that someday I would be dancing to Tyrone Davis with his wife, I would have thought you were insane. But there's one thing I'd do to improve this: get more R&B. I've heard twelve-bar blues a gazillion times and I love it, but many times you get the fourth-generation person. It is party music, though."

Personally, Rock 'n' Roll Hall-of-Famer Bobby "Blue" Bland was my favorite cruise act. I have always heard him as the black Frank Sinatra. I caught every one of his three sets, and his most inspiring show came midweek when guitarist Kenny Neal sat in on a scorching version of "Stormy Monday." Taj Mahal was standing in the front row of the Vista Lounge, clapping his hands. Bland made the trip just two weeks before his 76th birthday on January 27. My hunch is that he won't be on another cruise. We sailed home to Ft. Lauderdale in very stormy seas spinning 29 knots into northerly gusts. Bland performed his last set of the week under these conditions, and a couple of times I thought he was going to lose it. At one point he remarked from the weaving stage, "This reminds me of when I used to drink Johnnie Walker Red." And earlier in the day Bland told me, "Cruises are okay, but I'd rather be on dry land." Bland has lived in Memphis, Tennessee, his entire life.

On the flip-flop, zydeco legend Stanley Dural, Jr., a.k.a. Buckwheat Zydeco, has been a member of Naber's crew since the first excursion in 1992. Sitting poolside on an eighty-degree afternoon, Buckwheat smiled and said, "When I look out in the audience on one of these cruise shows, I see people from all over the planet. The music brings people together. Plus, this is a fabulous ship. The other ships have been good, but this one is the best. As you're doing this you don't want to go backwards. You want to continue to go forward." Like a ship in the ocean, like the facts of life.