

## The Daniel Castro Band: Everything Old is New Again: Part I

Posted by Robert Sproul on June 29, 2013 at 3:30pm



I had been working on a story about the Warren Hellman Museum and the music from the Great Recession when I was approached a few weeks ago by my friend David Perper to come see his new band, The Daniel Castro Band. I'm not in the habit of writing about new bands or bands that I know little about. I told David that I couldn't write a decent review for a Pink or a Fun concert if my life depended on it. I'm not interested in that music nor do I know much about the influences or the history. I usually approach artists for interviews who I follow or where I know something about where they're coming from.

David gave me an EP of the new Daniel Castro Band CD "Desperate Rain". I was surprised when I tossed it in the CD player that this big, bluesy polished sound came out. The recording sounded like a Kenny Wayne Sheppard or a Johnny Lang production. My first love in music is probably the blues. I've been captivated by the blues and writing about the East Bay blues and rhythm and blues scene for the past thirty five years. My tastes in blues music to be fair to this band currently run towards the retro analog sounding Texas blues favored by Jimmie Vaughn and Anson Funderberg and Rick Holmstrom. I have been kicking around East Bay clubs like Ester's Orbit Room, Eli's Mile High Club, Slim Jenkins Place and the New Orleans House since I was in high school.

The Daniel Castro Band sound is difficult to fit into any one category. The drums are recorded big and I hear traces of Sonny Landreth, Albert Collins and even some Stevie Ray Vaughn. And while Daniel is reluctant to say he plays strictly blues music when talking about his sound when he is on stage he clearly refers to his music as the blues and even calls out his influences from time to time. He agreed with me that the worst thing a musician can do is try and be something that they are not, to sound like some other group. My wife whose tastes run more towards the adult contemporary mainstream said that she thought the title song "Desperate Rain" or "Shelter Me" could be radio hits. The capacity crowd at Biscuits and Blues last Sunday night in San Francisco seemed to feel the same way.

I met Daniel, David and Johnny Yu, the bass player, at Yoshi's nightclub in Oakland the Thursday before I went to their concert. We met for dinner prior to attending a Jimmie Vaughn Tilt-a-Whirl concert featuring Lou Ann Barton. Members of the Vaughn band came up to our table throughout the evening to pay their respects. While I want to say that the Daniel Castro Band is "new", Daniel Castro has been around for quite some time. And the other interesting thing to note about this iteration of the Castro band, is that all the members have paid their dues, played with legends are not your typical twenty something start up band. David has been playing drums in bands around the Bay Area since the sixties in groups including Kingfish (a Grateful Dead spinoff), New Riders of the Purple Sage, Pablo Cruise, Jesse Colin Young, Hoodoo Rhythm Devils, Lowell Fulson (said Lowell didn't like white musicians in his band), Peter Rowan and the Free Mexican Airforce and the Rowan Brothers. Johnny and David had played together off and on since the 70's. Johnny had a brush with fame playing bass in a 90's blues band called Nitecry after he moved from his native Hawaii to San Francisco. Johnny also backed up Jimmy Witherspoon, Eric Burdon and Mary Wells on their swings through California.

The first thing that strikes you about Daniel (not to mention the rest of the band) is that he is a down to earth, and a naturally nice guy: No airs, no false intimidation, or blues cool nonsense. And all the band members have a sense of commitment and a seriousness about "making it" in what Daniel admits after forty years of playing seedy blues clubs is a tough business to break out into the larger venues.

Daniel Castro's story is what really caught my attention. Daniel was born in Ensenada, Baja California. He lived with his Mom who supported Daniel, his grandmother, two sisters Aida and Carmen (Jypsy) named after her favorite two operas, and his older brother Mario. Like a lot of border town families the Castro family was dirt poor and when

Daniel was five they moved to Tijuana. "My brother, sister and I came up with the idea that if we could find somebody to marry my mother we could come live in the promised land across the border. We met a truck driver that was hauling asphalt to pave the dirt roads in our neighborhood and we thought he was a good prospect." The truck driver came to their house for dinner and through Daniels mother's cooking "man she was a GREAT COOK", they fell in love and were married. Next came green cards in 1962, a move to Buena Park, California (Daniel was eight) and two more sisters added to the family: Patrica and Julie.

Daniel's mother and father had to both work long hours. Daniel and his brother Mario had always wanted to play guitar. "In Tijuana we found an old piece of ply wood in a field. We took it home and cut two guitars out of it, painted the knobs and pickguard on them, strung some fishing line with nails on them." After bugging their mother and father for years they finally got their first real guitar from Sears - a St. George electric guitar with no amplifier. The brothers shared the right-handed guitar which was no problem for Mario who was right-handed but a huge problem for Daniel who was left-handed. Daniel's brother would laugh at him while he tried to play it upside down so he finally taught himself to play right-handed. His mother and sister Aida sang Mexican songs around the house. Jypsy in particular had a remarkably powerful voice. By the time she was fifteen she was singing in a band called Jypsy and the Soul Brothers. Daniel describes her as " James Brown, Tina Turner and Janis Joplin all in one." She introduced Daniel to all the big soul stars on tour at the time and taught him to play Jimmy Reed riffs in the key of E. Jypsy also gave Daniel two BB King records and "when I heard that Lucille vibrato, that was it...it made me cry."

In 1969 Daniel's brother Mario was killed in a car accident and it changed the family's lives. Daniel was fifteen at the time. "I was sitting on the curb in front of our house after my brother's funeral and a friend came up and said 'Daniel you take that guitar and play your heart out for Mario wherever you go.'" (End of Part One).

## The Daniel Castro Band: Everything Old is New Again: Part 2

Posted by Robert Sproul on July 9, 2013 at 1:00pm

Daniel Castro was fifteen years old when his brother Mario died. His passion remained the blues even though by the time he entered high school anybody interested in being in a band was into rock. On Tom Mazzolini's Blues by the Bay radio show yesterday he featured an old interview with Bobby "Blue" Bland who passed away the prior week. Bobby Blue Bland was talking about the difference between blues and rock music. "Rock is all about the beat. Blues music is about the story. And white audiences haven't lived the stories so they can't relate as much to my music as Black audiences." He went on to cite his influences at Tony Bennett, Perry Como and Andy Williams, ironically all white ballad singers. Bland also talked about the nuances involved with singing a blues song, for example how a word like "baby" can be a plea or an admonishment depending on the inflection.



Last week I saw Robert Plant with his band the Sensational Space Shifters at the Greek Theater doing new world music twists on old Led Zeppelin blues based songs. Plant opened with "Babe I'm Gonna leave You" (an early Joan Baez folk song I recently learned) and made the word "baby" sound like a sexual plea. Two days later I heard Carla Thomas singing B-A-B-Y on my car radio and you can hear the different intonations from the backup singers in that particular song. Daniel Castro was drawn to this music and stuck with his passion. He appreciated at a young age, as did his bandmates, David Perper and Johnny Yu, the way vocals and instruments tell a story in the blues.

Daniel describes those early years in LA as his boot camp. "I had a friend, Paul Reed, a drummer who had a low budget recording project and he invited me to play on the session. Paul said it was a blues band which was in my wheelhouse and I didn't care how much we were being paid." Paul and Daniel went on to start a band called The Inner City Blues Band. They worked clubs in South Central LA and ended up as the quasi house band the Tropicana. Daniel would go to high school during the week and Reed would pick him up on Friday afternoon to play gigs Friday and Saturday nights and a matinee on Sunday for \$20.00 a gig. "The band started to attract a following," explained Daniel, "and a lot of the big name LA blues scene was checking us out...people like Delmar "Mighty Mouth" Evans from the Johnny Otis Show along with Pee Wee Crayton and Little Ester Phillips."

Like a lot of blues clubs in the late sixties, the Tropicana was not a Beverly Hills trendy nightclub. "It was a real rough place" Daniel explained. By 1974, the Inner City Blues Band ran into disco and glam rock and Daniel was forced to play anything to pay the bills: country and western, top 40 R&B, rock, doing tours of Arizona, Nevada and Washington. In 1985 Daniel was invited to see Ronnie Lane of the Small Faces at the famous Palomino Club in LA by a friend who was playing bass in Ronnie's band. "We hit it off and in 1990 I was invited to do a tour of Japan with his band. Ronnie was living in Austin Texas at the time so we did a warm up gig at the Continental Club prior to taking off to Japan." The great session player, Ian McLagen (who played with the Rolling Stones, The Faces, Bruce Springsteen and Jackson Brown among others) was the keyboard player for that tour.

After that tour Daniel came back to earth and found himself involved in the blues scene organically growing in North Beach in San Francisco. Little is written about the Grant and Green blues scene which really took off in the 80's and 90's, a scene which was home turf for blues bands like Johnny Nitro, Mark Hummel, Ben "King" Perkoff, Terry Hanck and Tommy Castro. On any given night you could walk into The Saloon, the Grant and Green or the Savoy Tivoli and see sweat pouring down the walls and a packed house digging the blues. Daniel started to get a reputation in this tight knit community as an exciting blues guitar player. He released his first CD, No Surrender, in 1995 which opened doors to larger venues like Slims, the Great American Music Hall and the Fillmore. The Daniel Castro band started getting gigs opening for Tommy Castro at the Mystic Theater and for Dave Mason at the State Theater in Modesto. One thing led to another before they knew it the band was playing blues festivals throughout the Western US.

This brings us up to the present day. Daniel has found a bass player in Johnny Yu and a drummer in David Perper who know how to interpret his songs and to give them a distinct sound. I heard an interview the other day on the radio with Shel Talmy, the producer of the first Who, Kinks and David Bowie albums. He was talking about how "you can take a bad band with a great song and have a hit...but you can't take a good band with a bad song and make that song appealing". When I think about the musicians whom I admire from Dave Alvin to Guy Clark to Joe Ely, Graham Parker or Iris Dement..these singer songwriters often don't have the best voices but their voices are perfect for the great songs that they write and perform. Amos Garrett has a new album, JazzBlues, where he plays classic Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis songs. I can tell a mile away that this is an Amos Garrett record because of the distinctive tone that comes from the tuning and finger picking style of his guitar.

Daniel and his talented bandmates have recorded an excellent CD, filled with original material, and they have the credentials and the smarts to have an impact in a genre that continually goes in and out of style but is always the basis for the real thing. If given a break I believe that an audience will find this band. As B.B. King was once quoted "I've said that playing the blues is like having to be Black twice. Stevie Ray Vaughn missed on both counts, but I never noticed". The same can be said about the Daniel Castro Band.