

Blues and brew tonight

Castro brings new songs to Miracle Mile

By **Tony Sauro**

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Some people can finish each other's sentences. Daniel Castro and Julie Friend can complete one another's songs.

"Yeah," Castro, a San Jose-based blues man, said with a laugh. "She's my partner in crime. She writes a lot of the lyrics."

Friend also is Castro's companion in life, She helped him craft the 13 songs on "Desperate Rain," the 59-year-old guitarist, singer and songwriter's first studio album since 1999.

Castro performs the friendly collaborations with his slimmed-down trio - no keyboards, unbluesy three-part harmonies and a tightly-connected musical relationship - tonight when he returns to Stockton's Valley Brewing Co.

Things have worked out right for Castro and Friend, also a poet, writer and singer who's a Kaiser Permanente nurse practitioner and San Jose resident..

"It's happened in a lot of different ways," said Castro, who met Friend in 2003 when she attended one of his gigs at JJ's Blues, a San Jose club. "My general thing is to work on something where I'll have a groove. A riff. A progression. Some kind of thing. I'll put it on a little tape recorder for her.

"Then, I'll go, 'This is an idea I have. Picture this.' She takes those ideas and does the lyrics. Sometimes, we'll write it together."

A Sacramento native who grew up in the South Bay, Friend, once a band vocalist, now sings in church and taught daughters Carla and Adrean "how to harmonize," Castro said. "It's just the most beautiful thing you've ever heard."

As the Ashley Trio (their birth father's surname), they performed with Castro's band in 2012 at Redwood City's Club Fox, mixing gospel songs with tunes by Elvin Bishop and the Staples Singers.

"It was really cool," said Castro, who "would like to do a record of her" for Friend. "Three girls harmonizing? Forget about it. Especially family voices."

Partly because Castro considers his current group - San Francisco drummer David Perper and Hawaii-born bassist Johnny Yu - a musical family with a lot of

"chemistry," they're harmonizing, too.

"I do feel this is a new direction," said Castro, who's "been out here on a solid basis" in Northern California since 1995. "It's not like Chicago blues. Usually, there's a keyboard, I'm fronting and the only guy singing. Now, we all sing. Three-part harmonies.

"The songs just sounded so good. Which is not to say somewhere down the line we couldn't add a keyboard. The thing is, it's such a good, good feeling, we're almost scared to let anybody into it. These are great, great guys. We've never had problem. It's been really a great ride."

It's been a fairly good write, too.

The title tune of "Desperate Rain" - which Castro formally introduced at San Francisco's Great American Music Hall on Jan. 3 - is "just a song about a guy that's used to taking a look at what's going on and taking account for himself."

In "Shelter Me," Castro and Friend talk about another guy "who 'all my life I've been all alone/No one to call my own/No home to call my own.' Kind of a lost guy just seeking for some shelter."

He really relates to how Friend filled out his "Dark Train" vision: " 'Comin', comin' down the line.' It's really spooky. A dark train. You hear it and you see it from way, way back coming from all these places. You pick up your soul, get yourself together. It's time to go."

Before he and Friend met, Castro was known for his bluesy shades of darkness.

"When we write these songs, I get a vision in my head that's almost like seeing a video or hearing a groove," he said. "In a couple of days, I get it to Julie and she gets it to work perfectly. Some people say, 'Man, Daniel, I love all your songs. But how come they're so depressing? The basic idea is that, 'Hey, man, there is a storm coming.' "

A lot of those folks live in the Central Valley and Sacramento area. Castro's band played in Stockton (May 24) and opened shows for Robert Cray (Sept. 24) and the Chris Cain Band (Jan. 11) at Tracy's Grand Theatre.

"I've been pretty lucky out there," said Castro, who was born in Ensenada, Baja, Mexico, and grew up in Tijuana and Buena Park. "Our fans are our friends. They're hard-earned. Once they're with you, they're with you. Just as loyal as loyal can be. I'm very happy to say they just love it. (Some are) kind of missing the old stuff, but say they're very, very positive. Just digging the direction we're going in."

Since 1999, that route was mostly playing in clubs. He had a "ton of songs" he wanted to record, which requires time and commitment. The other guys had families to raise. They agreed to disband. Castro hooked up with Yu, who moved from Hollister to San Jose, and the new album - his eighth - was recorded in Sausalito.

The trio format altered the basic electric-blues dynamic.

"You've got blues lovers who think we're basically blues-roots bands," said Castro, a left-hander who started playing an upside-down Fender Telecaster (like Jimi Hendrix) but switched to a right-handed approach. "When they listen to this material, people think it's not really a lot of blues - to Chicago blues aficionados. It is blues-based. I'm a blues guy. I can't get away from that. I'm blues."

Formerly employed by an amplifier manufacturer (Randall) and father of an adult daughter, his 14-year recording hiatus took its toll.

"A lot of things kinda came down," Castro, who also was caring for his ailing mother. "We had a band of good brothers who were basically working and feeding their families. I wanted to get back to the plan I had to get on with the process of this career. I just needed a career."

Now, Friend and his bluesy friends are helping Castro finish what he started.

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