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## Special Edition



# 2005

# Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise

# REVIEWED

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# 2005 Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise

## R E V I E W E D

By **Bill Wahl**

Jazz & Blues Report is offering this special PDF of the 2005 Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise review in an expanded format with many color pictures taken by Bill Wahl, Ron Weinstock and a few others. The first review is by J&BR editor Bill Wahl and is the same review as printed in both the hard copy and web editions of the May-June 2005 issue. In addition, we have included a good part of Ron Weinstock's review, expanding on reviews of actual performances. If you have downloaded the e-book version, the pictures will not look good if the pdf is magnified. However, if you download the hires version from the Download Issues page, you can magnify to pdf to 300% and still view the pictures clear as a bell.

It is Friday, January 21 and it is snowing like mad outside. Not unusual for Cleveland, Ohio I suppose...but what is unusual is that I am going on a week-long vacation. Yes, a vacation – something that I am able to experience about once every six or seven years. I'm going on the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise aboard a Holland America Line ship. Or at least I think I am...it's all up to the weather

Having spent a week in Puerto Rico six years ago, I have been wanting to return to the Caribbean. But a cruise? That's something I've never given much thought to. Two days at sea to spend a day on an island, only to have to quickly leave...sail again...and spend a day at another...sail again...and on.... And then I had heard you have to take dress clothes along for dinner. Dress up for dinner? I usually dress up for weddings and funerals. Besides, the Caribbean is hot. Why should I make myself even hotter? And lug all that stuff on the plane...and onto the ship?

But this just seemed like too much fun to miss...experiencing a cruise and a blues festival at the same time. And no minor festival either - this one would feature 16 top rate bands - including Dr. John, Taj Mahal, Corey Harris, Shemekia Copeland, Little Charlie & The Nightcats, Lil' Ed & The Blues Imperials, Derek Trucks Band, Kenny Neal, Susan Tedeschi and many more. More you say? Yes...like Zac Harmon, Rev. Billy C. Wirtz, Tommy Castro, The Phantom Blues Band (Taj's backup band for many years) Anson Funderburgh with Sam Myers, Bernard Allison and Chubby Carrier. But those were

just the ones I knew about. Each of these annual cruises (this was the fourth one, although it did have a predecessor under the name Ultimate Rhythm & Blues Cruise) has a number of secret guest artists. The cruisers (as we will call the 1,800 fans aboard from now on) don't find out who these guests are until they get to their respective rooms and look at the actual schedule.

The ports of call looked pretty inviting too. St. Maarten in the Dutch Upper Antilles, Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, and Turks & Caicos. That last port was new to me, but it is 39 miles southeast of the Bahamas, just north of The Dominican Republic and northeast of Cuba. I had always wanted to go to St. Thomas (I must have been inspired by the Sonny Rollins tune of the same name) and had been about 50 miles from there on the Puerto Rico trip. This time I would go well south of it, so that will be for another time. It is Cleveland...cold and snowy...downright depressing in fact....and I was going to the Caribbean on a floating blues festival!

But hold on here...we need to get back to the snow in Cleveland. The Weather Channel kept saying the horrible snow storm that was blanketing Chicago was headed towards Cleveland! All I could think of was the Blizzard of '77 when I lived in Buffalo! Could this really be happening? It was already snowing out there, and they were predicting we'd be getting somewhere in the neighborhood of 14" in the next 12 hours. Our web readers in Phoenix or Buenos Aires or other such places might think little of it. But believe me - 14" of snow is a heavy

duty situation...even if you *aren't* planning to go *anywhere!*

A couple of glasses of red wine would be needed to get me to sleep. In the morning everything was white outside, but my ride got me to the airport in time for the 9:30 a.m. flight - if, in fact, there would be a flight at all. I got to the gate and we all waited. The monitor said most flights were cancelled, but mine was still listed as a go. We waited. We got on the plane only to be de-iced a number of times. Then, about an hour or so later, we started to make our way very slowly to end of the runway and waited again. Then you won't believe what happened next - because I sure didn't...*we took off.*

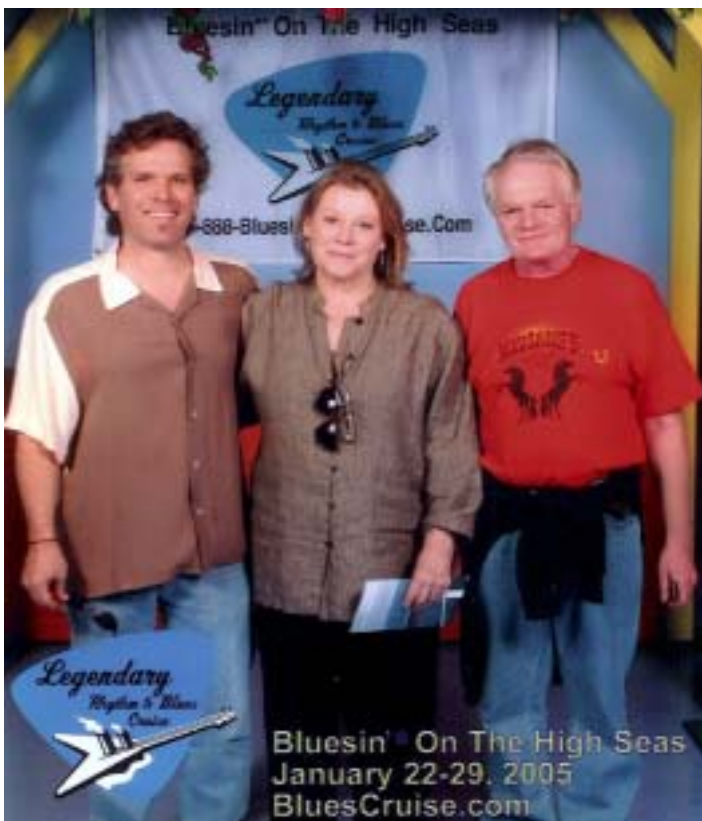
While airborne we heard that we were the last flight out of Cleveland and things were messed up everywhere. We were already about two hours off schedule and we might be held in a holding pattern trying to land. By the time I got to Lauderdale and into the terminal, it was around 3. I was supposed to board the ship around 1 and it was *leaving* at 5. I met a couple in the terminal who was looking for the same thing I was - the shuttle to take us to the ship. After chatting for a while, I found that I was talking to Doyle Bramhall - the drummer/vocalist/

composer from Texas who has some albums of his own out and wrote some songs for Stevie Ray Vaughan. I thought he looked familiar - I had reviewed one of his albums and must have recognized him from the picture. He was on the cruise as one of the "secret" guests. He and his wife Barb and I would become cruise buddies. I wasn't even on the ship yet and I was already meeting some interesting people.

Well we got to the ship at around 4. I was so late my cabin steward thought I had missed the cruise for sure. I told him so had I!

At this point I had very little time to acclimate myself to the new surroundings before it was time for dinner at 5:30. Unlike most cruises, although you are assigned a time (either 5:30 or 8) on the first night, from then on you can go to either seating. You can also sit with whoever you want wherever you want. You can also *wear* whatever you want. That's right - no dressing up - ever! I had already found that out and happily left the suit and ties at home with the snow, the weddings and the funerals. I met up with Doyle and Barb, and after one look at the menu I decided to toss out my diet for the week. Five course dinners...what a treat! As we sat down to eat the ship began to move. The party had begun.

The music had already started with Little Charlie kicking things off at 4:30 on the Pool Deck Stage. As we ate, Lil' Ed's outfit was playing in the largest venue, the Vista Lounge, nestled in 3 stories in the bow of the ship. Also at 4:30 was the Pro-Am Jam in the Crow's Nest bar. I had heard



**Doyle Bramhall, his wife Barb and me just before boarding the m/s Zuiderdam. Photo by the ship's photographer**



**Rick Estrin & Little Charlie Baty front Little Charlie & the Nightcats. Photo by Bill Wahl**





**The top deck in early morning. Photo by Bill Wahl**

that walking completely around Deck of the 951-foot-long ship 3 three times was a full mile. I figured throwing the diet out would warrant that after each dinner. The power walk didn't take that long and the 75° weather and the sounds of the Caribbean Sea made it quite nice indeed.



**Shemekia Copeland was always on fire. Here she is in a jam with Phillip Walker. Photo by Ron Weinstock**

The first act I got to see was Shemekia Copeland on the Pool Deck at 9. She was on fire and had me all primed for Taj Mahal at the Vista at 11:30. I was a bit tired after that and figured I'd go back to the room and take a nap. It was then that I remembered that the Pool Deck stage was *directly* above my room. I was on Deck 8 - it was on 9. No rest for the wicked - I went up to see Tommy Castro lead the Pro Jam at 1 a.m. I met some folks from Arizona and danced, drank Red Stripe and carried on until well after 3. By the way - as I did the above there was an Acoustic Jam in the Queen's Lounge at 8:30, Chubby Carrier played the Vista at 9:30, The Pro-Am Jam was at 10 at the Crow's Nest,

and The Phantom Blues Band played the Pool Deck at 11. Get the idea? No normal person could see *all* of the performances on this cruise, although I'm sure there were some who tried.

I figured the best way to do it was to go through the week-long schedule on the first day and map out a game plan. You can at least see a full performance or two, or three from each band and still manage to eat and sleep. But after the second day I tossed out that game plan and just winged it. That worked just fine.

Waking early on Day 2 we were out at sea and it finally dawned on me where I was. Yes, I was no longer in snowy Cleveland, but rather on the m/s. Zuiderdam somewhere east of Cuba. The Zuiderdam is an 11-deck ship and the first in Holland America's new Vista Class. Carrying 1,850 passengers and a crew of 800 it weighs 85,000 gross tons and clips at a top speed of 24 knots. In other words - it is mighty big and quick for its size. Its maiden voyage was in 2002. At 10:30 a.m. there was a Virgin Party for first-time cruisers on the pool deck. We heard some useful tips on cruising, and then we all got laid. Well, actually it was the flower necklace lei like you get in Hawaii - but it sure sounds good, doesn't it. At the same time, there was a returnee party at the Vista. Since we already had our band schedules, we now knew who the secret guest artists were. I already knew about Doyle Bramhall, and the others were Curtis Salgado, Tito Jackson (yes...Michael's quiet brother), Phillip Walker, Dave Maxwell, Mitch Woods, Aubrey Ghent, Hawkeye Herman & Fiona Boyes.

For me to give you a blow-by-blow of every day and every show would be ridiculous. On Saturday alone there were 15 separate performances at the various venues and stages throughout the ship, and many overlapped or were going on at the same time. Throughout the week there were several Industry Panel sessions relating to blues as a business highlighting magazines, radio, CD and band publicity, etc.

The days we were at sea there were these Musician Workshops: Gospel Musician Workshop; Essential Guitar Heroes for Modern Blues; Steel Drum Demonstration; Keyboards-The Key to Composing and Accompaniment; Rhythm of the Blues...Drums, Percussion & Second Line, and fi-



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**The legendary Ralph Macdonald was an unannounced guest on the cruise. He was at the drummers workshop and sat in on jams. Photo by Ron Weinstock**

wrote "Where Is The Love" for Roberta Flack and "Just The Two Of Us" for Grover Wahsington. He was on many of the CTI and KUDU albums in the 70s along with drummer Steve Gadd and pianist Richard Tee. Ralph was also a secret guest - so secret in fact that he wasn't even announced. Nice surprise. My man Doyle also gave a demonstration on drums and talked about being a drummer/vocalist. Also each day there were Acoustic Jams and Pro-Am Jams - often two of each, and there were many impromptu jams popping up through-



**Doyle Bramhall and Shemekia Copeland. Hey...is that lipstick on his cheek? Photo by Barbara Logan**

nally Classic Styles of the Harmonica Masters. Being a drummer, I enjoyed the drummers workshop where Ralph MacDonald gave us a conga demo. MacDonald is the famous studio percussionist who, along with his partner Bill Salter,



**An impromptu jazz jam broke out on the Blues Cruise. From left, Denny Freeman (now playing with Bob Dylan), David Maxwell and Darrell Leonard. Photo by Bill Wahl**

out the ship as many of the cruisers who were musicians brought along their instruments. Anywhere they could find a piano - or just an open spot - they'd take it over and jam. What fun!

I caught as many of the scheduled shows and jams as I could, and always made it a point to catch the 11 p.m. shows under the Caribbean stars on the outside pool deck where I was able to see Phantom Blues Band, Anson Funderburgh, Shemekia Copeland, Dr. John, Susan Tedeschi, Chubby Carrier and Tommy Castro. I would often catch earlier shows at the Pool deck as well, and in the end I'd have to say that was my favorite venue. The sound was just right, and regardless of how crowded it was you could always find a way to see the band. Many folks went up to the next deck and watched from above. And that was also the venue for the late night Pro Jams, which started at 1 a.m. hosted by a different band each night. Some of these jams went on until 5 a.m. My room, of course, was still just below the stage. But I have to tell you, if I got too tired the ship just rocked me to sleep regardless of what was going on above. Wine helped.

Some might think that a seven day blues cruise might get a bit tiresome after a while. After all, how many times can you listen to "Sweet Home Chicago?" But some very creative booking was done to make sure that does not happen. The bands on board played different styles of blues, from the traditional to Chicago, Texas, and through to modern and blues-rock. In fact, two of the bands that really got the crowds roaring aren't strictly blues bands





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**Dr. John stirring the gumbo. Photo by Ron Weinstock**

at all. Dr. John mixes jazz and blues into his Creole voodoo swamp gumbo, and Derek Trucks, though he played some blues, was really more of a jazzy jam band. In fact, he even did a version of John Coltrane's take on "Greensleeves" that blew



©2005 Ron Weinstock

**Derek Trucks. Photo by Ron Weinstock**

everyone away. Then there was Chubby Carrier with his fantastic zydeco sets. Although I never listen to much zydeco on CD - it is a perfect party music and always a gas live...and it really gets the dancers going. But, even though all the other bands were pretty much strictly blues - I don't recall hearing "Sweet Home Chicago" even once. I had seen Little Charlie and Lil' Ed, both Alligator artists, many times before and they delivered their usual style of party-time blues and also filled the dance floor. I had also seen Shemekia Copeland before, and she was so good on Day 1 I managed to catch her 2 more times. Her father, the late-great Johnny Copeland, would indeed be proud. That woman can sing the blues. Corey Harris was an-

other one I could not get enough of. And although I'd heard Dr. John several times, the cruise sets were the best I'd heard from him. Although he played mostly songs from his latest excellent Blue Note album *N'Awlinz* (including "St. James Infirmary"), he did several old Dr. J. favorites as well, including "I Walk On Guilded Splinters" and Right Place, Wrong Time."



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**Chubby Carrier leading a zydeco party. Photo by Ron Weinstock**

too choppy for them to dock ashore and we had to stay on the ship. So it was more food, drink and music for us!

On Day 4 we arrived around noon at Tortola in the British Virgin Islands. As I watched the cruisers



**Street scene in Tortola. Photo by Bill Wahl**

Tuesday was Day 3 and we arrived early in the morning at Turks & Caicos. We had to anchor off shore and those who wanted to go to the island would be shuttled on the lifeboats (which for this purpose were called "tenders") but it was





**More from the quaint part of Tortola. Photo by Bill Wahl**  
disembarking I wondered if Tortola was ready for this particular breed of visitors! Although there were a lot of tents where you could buy shirts and hats, once you got past them there was a quaint little town where people drove on the wrong side of the street. You have to be careful crossing because of the tendency to look the wrong way and get whacked, but I survived and enjoyed walking around the town on some streets most of the tourists did



**A street drummer on Tortola. Photo by Bill Wahl**

not seem to find. It actually felt like I was in Jamaica. As we departed Tortola, the Derek Trucks Band played a highly energized set on the pool deck. I'm sure everyone on all the sailboats in the bay heard it - as well as many, if not all, of the people in town. Some of the boats even followed us for a while to get more of Trucks' music.

Day 5 we docked in St. Maarten and were again immediately assaulted by shops selling all



**The walkway from the ship into town on St. Maarten. What a sight after the winter-hell of Cleveland a few days earlier. Photo by Bill Wahl**

kinds of stuff. A brief walk into town ended at the beach which was another quaint sight. It was lined with bars and island bands with steel drummers,



**The beach at St. Maarten. Photo by Bill Wahl**

but as soon as you got beyond that it was hundreds of shops and not much else. I walked around a bit and settled back at a beach bar where I found myself with a Heinekin dancing with two women from Norway who were on another cruise. There were other options, like go to one of the more remote beaches, or the nude beach - but I talked to some folks who went there and they said it was not a pretty site. Apparently the locals go somewhere else during tourist season and the only nude people at the nude beach are tourists you would *not* want to see nude. Glad I missed that one. After dancing a few, I went to the Bleu Peter, a little French restaurant at the end of the beach for an exquisite gi-





**Le Bleu Peter for seafood chowder.** Photo by Bill Wahl  
ant bowl of seafood chowder. As we left St. Maarten, Susan Tedeschi played on the pool deck.

Days 6 & 7 were all at sea and the party strengthened. As I mentioned above, there were no formal nights on the Blues Cruise, Instead they had theme nights. The best of these was on Day 6 - Mardi Gras Night. It started with a parade through the dining room which included the cooks, and later hundreds of cruisers dressed up for the night. Some of the costumes were quite a sight! There was also a Pajama Night as we left Tortola, and a Pillage &



**Definitely my vote for the best costume on Mardi Gras night.** Photo by Bill Wahl



**The Mardi Gras Parade in the dining room.** Photo by Miki Nord



**Mardi Gras continues on the pool deck.** Photo by Bill Wahl

Plunder in the Islands Night after reboarding in St. Maarten.

On Days 3 & 6 there were autograph parties where each artist had their own table and the cruisers could meet them and get CDs, pictures, posters or guitars autographed.

As for the food - I thought it was superb. As I mentioned, the dining rooms served both lunch and 5-course dinners. You could also eat at the Lido Restaurant, which was buffet style and had several different areas so you could choose from numerous different styles of food. I hit the Italian section quite a few times for either fettucini and pizza later at night. There was also a high class restaurant where you could get incredible steaks - but you

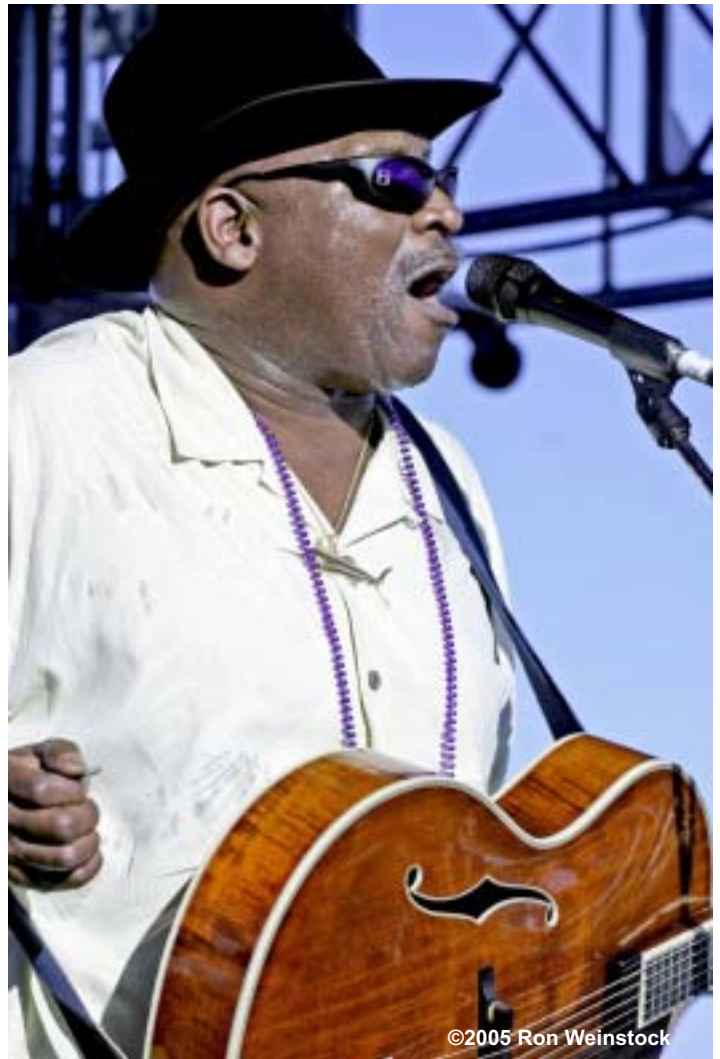




**Another colorful reveler on Mardi Gras night. Photo by Bill Wahl**

had to pay at that one. Other than that - the food was free - all included in the price of the cruise. Coffee and tea were also free any time of the day or night. Pop was not, but you could buy a pop card for the week. I ate like a pig all week with total disregard for calories, fat content or what time it might be. What price did I pay? I lost 7 pounds. Figure that one out! All that walking perhaps - both on the ship and on shore - and the dancing as well.

The alcoholic drinks were not free. Could you



**Taj Mahal performs every year on the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise. Photo by Ron Weinstock**

imagine that - I could see the headlines "Cruise ship line goes bankrupt after giving free drinks to blues fans." Of course, that is the policy on all cruises. The prices are not unlike what you'd pay at a night club. You can not bring alcoholic beverages on board except wine and champagne. That is where I lucked out, as dry red wine is my preference and I bought some bottles in a Tortola grocery store that lasted me the rest of the cruise.

The ship had many amenities to enjoy. There was a spa where cruisers could enjoy (for a fee) exotic skin, body and hair treatments including hot stone massages. The spa's fitness facility included exercise equipment and exercise professionals for personal training. There was also a casino, a coffee bar, swimming pool and a duty-free gift shop where a wide variety of items could be purchased without paying tax or duty. The prices were extremely reasonable. But if you buy liquor, you can't take it to your room. You get it at the end of the



**Our flag was flying high as we pulled into Tortola. Photo by Bill Wahl**





**Lil' Ed and Kenny Neal in a jam.. Photo by Ron Weinstock**  
cruise.

The Blues Bazaar had all kinds of blues or Blues Cruise related stuff. The musicians on board brought their own items which were sold at the bazaar, including shirts, hats, CDs, DVDs, posters, photos and the like. Although I brought my laptop, I decided the first day out that I would not touch a computer for the week. I took notes the old fashioned way - *like writing by hand* - and thus had no reason to use the internet room. But I did walk through it - and it was packed with cruisers checking their email or whatever. It also had a nominal fee, or you could buy a pass for the week.

I talked with several members of the Zuiderdam's crew and every one told me we had the wildest, craziest, most party-hearty group they had ever seen assembled on one ship. Hey...that's one hell of a compliment to the blues cruisers. Oddly enough, the same ship had been used the week



**Bernard Allison in action. Photo by Ron Weinstock**

and McClinton's crowd partied, but were nowhere near as much fun as our lot.

Oh yes...and what about sea legs? I was told I should get some kind of patch to avoid sea sickness, but I didn't. I figured if I got sick, I'd go to the ship's doctor. It took a little while to get the sea legs, and many of us walked a little funny sometimes, but that ship is so big and with the stabilizers and all it was really no problem. If you have a tendency to get seasick - have your doctor write you a prescription for the patch as I hear it works great and some of the cruisers had them.

As far as cash money goes, you don't need



**Crowd shot by the Pool Stage. Photo by Bill Wahl**



**Deck 10 just above the pool deck was a good spot to see the bands on the Pool Stage. Photo by Bill Wahl**





**Your room key card is also your ID and a charge card on board the ship.**

charge your drinks and buy stuff in the Duty Free Gift Shop and the Blues Bazaar. You also have it swiped when you disembark at the ports and again when you embark again. At the end of the cruise you'll be issued a bill listing everything you bought. Save all your receipts and check it carefully. There were a couple of drinks on mine I wouldn't even put in somebody else's mouth, but I went to the office and they took care of it with no hassles.

On the first day of the cruise I had the pleasure of meeting Roger Naber, the mastermind behind the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise. Naber has worked in the music industry for 25 years and was the owner, talent buyer and promotional director for The Grand Emporium in Kansas City since 1985 until he recently sold the club. I wanted to meet him as we had some things in common. I was the national talent buyer and show manager for Peabody's DownUnder in Cleveland during the same period in the 80s, and we did a lot of the same acts. I knew much of what had to be done to pull off shows like these - but the thought of organizing over 80 performances plus workshops, autograph signings and all - and on a ship at sea to boot - was mind-blowing to say the least.



**A Caribbean sunrise. Photo by Bill Wahl**

much. When you sign in they'll swipe your credit card and issue you an Ms. Zuiderdam card. You'll use this to get into your room,

Roger told me there were people from nearly every state in the U.S. and from 11 other countries on board for this cruise...countries like Germany, England, Singapore and Australia. He said there was even a group that drove to Fort Lauderdale from Anchorage, Alaska in an RV. This was the biggest cruise yet. It had originally sold out and they moved it to a larger ship, which sold out as well.

I wish I had bumped into Roger at the end of the cruise to congratulate him and his staff on what certainly appeared to be a flawless production (I would think that something just *had* to go wrong somewhere, but I sure didn't notice anything) and on such a grand scale. One thing I noticed on the very first day was that all the shows I went to started on time, which can happen only if the ones coming before them end on time. The traffic management in this department was something I'd not seen at many small festivals, let alone a mammoth festival at sea with so many different venues, musicians, sound systems, etc. Kudos definitely go out to Roger and his gang in Kansas City.



**Taj Mahal and Dr. John conversing by the main pool. Photo by Doyle Bramhall.**

One of the big differences between the Blues Cruise and other landlocked festivals is that the musicians and the cruisers are able to meet and mingle. As its website says "Everyone has a backstage pass." I rode the elevator once with Derek Trucks and Susan Tedeschi, and another time with Lil' Ed. I spoke with Dr. John briefly in the Lido Restaurant, Kenny Neal by the Taco Bar, and Little Charlie and Taj Mahal by the pool, where I also had a long conversation with Australian guitarist/singer Fiona Boyes.



**The stern of the Holland America m/s Zuiderdam docked in Tortola. The windows you can see in the two lower decks (in the black section) are the main dining room. Photo by Bill Wahl**

After another long day of nonstop music on Day 7, the party culminated with a blowout in the Vista Lounge featuring Derek Trucks at 11:30 p.m. followed by the Open Jam Finale from 1:15 until God knows when. I stayed as long as I could hold up and watched the rest on TV in my room until I passed out. Throughout the cruise one station had a live feed from the Vista and another had blues documentaries. About the only place I didn't notice anything about the blues was in the shower, but perhaps I simply missed it.

Day 8 is a short one. I woke up rather early again and we were already docked in Lauderdale, right next to the brand new Queen Mary 2, another monstrous ship. From there on, it's pretty much disembarkation starting around 10, going to the airport and returning to reality. Mine was SNOW, COLD and CLEVELAND!

I've got to tell you, if you like the blues and have even had a remote interest in going on a cruise, I strongly recommend the Blues Cruise. I can't guarantee that you can eat like a mindless pig and lose 7 pounds. I don't even know if I could pull that off again. But I can guarantee you'll have a vacation you'll never forget. And if you have a pirate's outfit, an outstanding pair of pajamas or some Mardi Gras duds - by all means bring 'em along!

The 2006 Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise is now booking for January 8-15 on Holland America's Ms. Westerdam. From what I can tell, it



**We ended exactly where we started out - docked in Fort Lauderdale next to the the gigantic Queen Mary 2. Photo by Bill Wahl**

appears to be exactly like the Zuiderdam except that it is 2 years newer as it was brought into service in 2004. The ports of call look even more interesting than the 2005 cruise, and there will be 4 of them.

For more information, and to book your spot on the cruise, go to [www.bluescruise.com](http://www.bluescruise.com) or call 888-BLUESIN' (816-753-7979). And don't worry about the late night stage being above your room - they won't do that to you unless that's what you want. One final word though - don't procrastinate - the rooms are going fast and judging by the lineup of bands (see below) which was just announced - it will no doubt sell out fast.

### **The 2006 Itinerary:**

**Jan 8 - Ft. Lauderdale, FL**

**9 - Key West, Fla**

**10 - Bluesin' At Sea**

**11 - Cozumel, Mexico**

**12 - Georgetown, Grand Cayman**

**13 - Ocho Rios, Jamaica**

**14 - Bluesin' At Sea**

**Jan 15 - Ft. Lauderdale, FL**

**2006 Lineup:** Taj Mahal, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Little Milton, Buckwheat Zydeco, Rod Piazza & The Mighty Flyers, Bob Margolin with The Chicago Legends (Hubert Sumlin, James Cotton, Pinetop Perkins, Willie "Big-Eyes" Smith & More), Tab Benoit, Jimmy Thackery, John Hammond, Joe Bonamassa, Kenny Neal and Billy Branch, Anthony Gomes, Ronnie Baker Brooks, René Austin, Phillip Walker, Corey Harris & The 5 x 5, Ana Popovic, Dianna & Blue Mercy (2005 IBC Winners) PLUS SURPRISE GUESTS!

**[www.bluescruise.com](http://www.bluescruise.com)**



# Cruise Review by Ron Weinstock

Ron Weinstock, a regular contributor for Jazz & Blues Report for the past 30 years, is also the editor of the D.C. Blues Society Newsletter. We have included excerpts from his review of the cruise concentrating mainly on performances.

The music was terrific. It was neat to see “young Zach” who apparently was on his third or fourth cruise jamming at pool-side on guitar as Mitch Woods led things on piano. I turned around and young Zach was in the drummer’s chair and a bit later was on keyboards. Acts like Shemekia Copeland, Anson Funderburgh, and Little Ed I have seen enough times to know what to expect and they did not disappoint. Corey Harris played solo on the cruise opening his sets with some gems from Muddy Waters and it was a delight to hear Muddy being interpreted. Corey’s set though encompassed a wide range of blues including some of his originals. Bernard Allison’s live performance evokes his father’s memory even more than his recordings do although live his guitar playing was emphasized a bit more. It was a delight to see Tito Jackson guesting with him on a couple numbers (including a vocal on “Stormy Monday”).

Chubby Carrier’s set was a real party with his lively zydeco and a terrific band that included the energetic frottoir (rubboard) player, a horn section augmented by the tenor sax of Tom Fitzpatrick of Wolfman Washington’s Band and the extra percussion and stage antics of Schubalina, the cruise’s Minister of Dance, who added percussion. I sometimes fail to appreciate just how good Kenny Neal is, but his sets were fabulous including a tribute to his later father, Rafal, Sr. Kenny was a musical triple threat playing lap steel guitar in addition to guitar and harmonica and on the last day I caught Little Ed and David Maxwell jamming with him.

Tommy Castro may not be of my taste, he sounded real good and has so many followers he obviously is doing something right. Little Charlie was terrific and on the last date Charlie Baty and Rick Estrin joined Anson and band for the beginning of their last set on the cruise. What can one say about Dr. John who did a nice tour of New Orleans music and his own career in his sets with Shemekia adding her vocals on “When the Saints Go Marching In,” doing the part Mavis

Staples has on the good Doctor’s most recent album, while Taj Mahal was himself backed by his long-time band that included Ralph MacDonald on percussion and a reed player Rudy who was fabulous as Taj took us uptown as well as had us ride the Katy. It was fun watching Dr. John perform “Walk on Guilted Splinters” and Taj was in back of the standing crowd on the lower level of the theater venue singing along. The Phantom Blues band which has backed Taj on tour and recording were on their own this cruise and played some fabulous music. Mike Finnegan on keyboards probably comes as close as a leader of this group as anyone, but the band includes the Texacali Horns and guitarist Denny Freeman was one of the two guitarists in the Austin band, Paul Ray and the Cobras back in the seventies. The other guitarist was some SRV guy). Denny later would become part of the legendary house band at Antone’s where he backed everybody who was everybody in blues. Then to hear Shemekia sing her father’s “Excuses, Excuses” at the jam led by the Phantom Blues Band after Taj sung “Senor Blues” with them earlier was like blues heaven.

And there were the panels. Listening to the drummers and percussionist Ralph MacDonald talk their trade including the legendary Herman Ernest recalling how he helped Allen Toussaint arrange Lady Marmalade for LaBelle. The panel of guitarists Tito Jackson, Phillip Walker, Bernard Allison, Derek Trucks and Tommy Castro discussed how they got started and influences. Derek Trucks did astonish some by stating he stopped listening to guitarists when he turned 14 and started listening to horn players, world music and most recently gospel singers, especially female gospel singers, which impacted on his playing. It was fascinating to listen to Tito recall even in the heyday of the Jackson Five sometimes being called to lay down a Jimmy Reed or similar blues groove.

Even the less formal moments were memorable from listening to Fiona Boyes from

down under in Melbourne open an acoustic jam with a choice rendering of a lesser known Memphis Minnie number to strolling towards one stage and hearing some boogie woogie piano and then joining a small group watching Dave Maxwell and guitarist Denny Freeman jamming. Young Zach even picked up the acoustic bass for a number but without some amplification it was a bit too much to play. Arthur Neilson, Shemekia's guitarist, also sat in for a couple numbers on bass. Nice to hear this indeed.

There was so much good music but the absolute highlights for me were Corey Harris's wonderful sets, Zac Harmon and the Mid-South Blues Revue and the Derek Trucks Band. I already talked about Corey Harris so let me spend a little time on Zac Harmon who is a fabulous singer with a great stage presence and a tight band with some great harp from Jeff Stone along with terrific original material. He was the winner of the Blues Foundation's International Blues Challenge and his cruise appearance was one of the prize for winning. By the cruise's end he had developed a strong following among the cruisers. Originally from Jackson, Mississippi, he was mentored by Sam Myers and Mel Brown and his music was the fruit of the strong musical roots they helped instill in him (to apply an analogy he himself stated during his performance). On his "Full Figured Woman" (a tune that Dr. S.O. Feelgood would agree with) and mixing in of a old-school rap (not a rap in the vein of hip hop music) and interacted with the au-

dience.

Then there was Derek Trucks who I must admit is not strictly a blues act although his music certainly has deep blues roots and their sets included a number of blues songs like 44 Blues and Leavin' Trunk that were wonderfully done with Mike Mattison ably handling the vocals (he was really excellent on "I Wish I Know How It felt to be Free"). But how do you describe a set that included sacred lap steel guitarist Aubrey Ghent as well as his wife, Susan Tedeschi who usually added a guest vocal or two to his set, and sang wonderfully as well. On the last night of the cruise Corey Harris joined the Derek Trucks Band for a terrific 44 Blues. But when I heard the Trucks Band interpret Roland Kirk's "Volunteered Slavery," and "Greensleeves" based on the John Coltrane Quartet recording I was floored. Trucks is an amazing musician and his band is as well, even if they transcend blues. His guitar playing has a vocalized quality to it, at times emulating the human voice at other times sounding like the sitar as the band evoked classical Indian music.

Sometime during the middle of the cruise I was wandering the Blues Cruise store and consciously thinking to myself that I was really having a good time. That might sound corny to you reading this extended impression of the cruise, but the proof of my feelings is that my wife agreed that we should put a deposit for next year's cruise. You should note that she likes blues, but is not nearly as devoted to the music

as I am. There was more than enough music for her that she enjoyed and more than enough things for her to do, that we placed the deposit down. Bear in mind that cruises are expensive, and you can travel to several blues festivals for what one might pay for this, but I think any blues lover would enjoy going on this at least once in their lifetime.

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