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More than a feeling: South Florida tribute bands cast a magical spell on audiences

By BEN CRANDELL

Tribute bands like Smokin' and KISS Alive are having a moment in South Florida.

Tribute bands. We know what you're thinking. So do they.

Just some old dudes desperately trying to recapture their youth with fake hair and borrowed guitar licks in a circle of self-gratifying simulation.

Some of that may be true. But this is also true: The best South Florida tribute bands, the polished pros who inspire fans to line up for selfies after the show, expend crazy effort, time and money with a more altruistic goal — they want to recapture *your* youth.

If it means [KISS Alive](#) bassist Andrew Goodpaster has to spend \$7,000 on vintage guitars and four hours perfecting his Gene Simmons makeup, so be it.

If it means guitar ace [Brev Sullivan](#), who once rocked in a band led by Tom Cruise, has to learn ABBA's "Take a Chance on Me," he's in.

The payoff? When Eddie Jelley, of Hollywood, begins the opening cascade of guitar on "More Than a Feeling" with his Boston tribute [Smokin'](#), it is powerful and immediate.

"I love looking at the people's faces. People are happy. It's the whole reason I'm alive," says Jelley, something of a minor rock-guitar god growing up on Long Island, with stints in the band Salty Dog and local legends the

Good Rats. “I never made it famous. Sure, I’m on a few records here and there, blah blah blah. You know what? This is the best part of my life. I am really enjoying this.”



Eddie Jelley, left, and Frank Vestry perform with Boston tribute band Smokin' in West Palm Beach. (John McCall/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

With its “vintage” audiences, South Florida has long been a hotbed for tribute bands that call the area home and a lucrative destination for regional acts. But now, more than ever, these [homegrown groups are having a moment.](#)

The real bands, if they are still around, have always been reluctant to make the trip down into South Florida, travel that makes a show more costly for performers, club owners and audiences. COVID safety concerns, for themselves and their patrons, have taken these bands off the road entirely.

Within that void, South Florida tribute bands and their audiences have grown more numerous and the competition is more fierce, according to performers and club owners.

This summer there are two new music series heavy in retro performers coming to the Casino @ Dania Beach and Revolution Live in Fort Lauderdale, and a new TV show called “Clash of the Tributes USA” is shooting a battle of the bands at the Hard Rock in Hollywood.

Galuppi's in Pompano Beach has been attracting socially distanced full houses for nostalgia acts two to three times a week on a new stage essentially built as a response to the popularity of tribute bands.

"I'll probably never get to see the real KISS, so these guys are the next best thing," said Jillie Doss, 41, of Hollywood, before a recent concert by KISS Alive at Galuppi's. She was wearing a Gene Simmons T-shirt purchased online. "This is so much fun."

He built it, they came

When Grant Galuppi was looking to revitalize his [namesake restaurant](#) at Pompano Beach Golf Course, he knew the outdoor entertainment space had potential. The new stage is more than double the size of the old one, with higher quality lighting and sound capability, and a large pergola covering most of the more than 200 seats. The new venue was awaiting final permits when the pandemic hit last spring. Galuppi began booking music again about three months later, with strict distancing rules in place, and has seen strong business.

"We saw the demand. The audience down here is huge," said Galuppi, 39.

Galuppi began scheduling more tribute bands in place of traditional classic-rock cover bands about six years ago.

"The first one I hired was [the Long Run](#), the Eagles tribute band. They cost three or four times the amount of other bands, but they had the following," he said. "People would hear it's a Beatles band or Billy Joel, and they would come out."

There has been an explosion in the number of tribute bands since then, he said.

"Five or six years ago there weren't enough bands, but now they're everywhere," Galuppi said. "A lot of bigger bands come from out of state, and they could be awesome, but the local tributes have more support. There's nothing like the locals."

Quality also is improving, Galuppi said. "They're better. They get more money, and they want to play less," he said, laughing.

At Revolution Live in downtown Fort Lauderdale, owner Jeff John first struck paydirt in the genre about 15 years ago with the nationally touring Sublime tribute Badfish. He's watched the genre grow steadily ever since. "People want to relive the good old days. People want to relive the great times, the fun times, the family times. It brings me back to that place, and there's not a lot of stuff out there that does that, right? That's a lot of what's driving this whole tribute craze," John says.

Revolution will host the Summer Tribute Band Series beginning May 22 with a Bob Marley night featuring Miami singer [Kevin “Yvad” Davy](#). Performances continue June 12 (Palm Beach County-based [In the Light of Led Zeppelin](#)) and June 26 (Van Halen tribute Best of Both Worlds).

The Casino @ Dania Beach also will feature local tribute bands this summer at its Stage 954 entertainment venue, beginning June 5 with [South City Brothers](#) (Doobie Brothers).

Joe Eshkenazi, entertainment and events manager at the casino, says COVID capacity limitations meant he had less money to play with in booking acts. Tribute bands have proved popular, available and less expensive than the national acts he typically hosts, he said.

“Financially it works out for us, without having to sacrifice the quality of the show, the quality of musicianship,” Eshkenazi said. “I’ve been able to find a lot of really good-quality bands.”

He called the Doobie Brothers tribute South City Brothers “a monster band with monster musicians.”

At DAER nightclub at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood, “Clash of the Tributes USA” is shooting its first two seasons in front of live audiences each Wednesday through Oct. 27. The first two South Florida representatives are Fort Lauderdale Tom Petty tribute [Petty Hearts](#) (June 2) and [KISS Alive](#) (June 16).

What makes a great tribute band?

There is no shortage of Van Halen tribute bands roaming the Earth, but if you want to know who’s No. 1, just ask Gene Henricksen. The singer, who splits his time between Long Island and Palm Beach County, channels David Lee Roth with the band [Completely Unchained](#).

“When it comes to creating the Van Halen vibe, with the look, the musicianship and the way we deliver the music, we’re the best,” said Henricksen, pointing out that they are religious students of Van Halen video. Indeed, at a packed pre-pandemic concert at Revolution Live, mop-topped guitarist Jake Miller, nailing every note on “Running With the Devil” and “Panama” in red-and-white overalls, was the spitting image of Eddie Van Halen. Henricksen, trim and tan, quickly scissor-kicked his way into the hearts of ladies in the front row.



Gene Henricksen, left, and Jake Miller create the Van Halen vibe with Completely Unchained at Revolution Live. (Jennifer Lett/Sun Sentinel)

Revolution owner Jeff John says Completely Unchained is an example of a good tribute band's ability to transport the audience.

"What makes a show? It's the look, it's the energy, it's the quality of the sound, it's the experience," he said.

"You've gotta play the part, right? You've gotta be somewhat on par with what it was."

[Completely Unchained has a full schedule](#) of East Coast shows this summer, including a July 4 performance in Wellington.

Eddie Jelley's Smokin' may lack a physical resemblance to the originals but it has a critical sound element that few other Boston tributes can muster — soaring harmonies from all five band members, essential on cuts such as "Something About You" and "More Than a Feeling."

This level of polish takes time. Jelley is retired, but the rest of the band members, who live in Broward and Palm Beach counties, have day jobs.

“We’ve all been in a million cover bands. If you’re going to try something different you might as well shoot for the stars and I think Boston was a challenge for all of us,” said lead vocalist Frank Vestry, who lives in Jupiter.

“We really had to put a lot of time in, rehearsals, learning the parts. When you do a tribute you want to do it as authentic as you can. People want to hear you sound as close to the record as you can.”

At a recent Smokin’ show at Galuppi’s, Pompano Beach resident Dal Chance said he felt like he was in a time machine.

“It’s a major rush. Great sound. You forget how many great songs they had back then,” he said.

What’s more, all five members of Smokin’ also play in the Styx tribute band Renegade, often doing alternating sets in a single night. Jelley also leads TrueRumors, the Fleetwood Mac tribute.

“Every gig is like Halloween,” Jelley said. “I have a different wig for every occasion. Every band I’m in I have a different look. Some people don’t even know I’m the same guy from this band to that band, which is hilarious.”



Boston tribute band Smokin' showcases harmonies from all five members of the band. (John McCall/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

[Rock of ABBA](#), with members from Fort Lauderdale and Miami, has the look, with Rina Miranda and Jill Minor (as Agnetha and Frida, respectively) out front in sparkling boots and bell-bottoms. It also has impressive

musicianship courtesy of Hollywood native Brev Sullivan on guitars and keyboards, as well as bassist Crystal Fawn and drummer Eddie Gresley.

Along with being local jazz great Ira Sullivan's son, Sullivan has another other claim to fame — his performance as the guitarist in the band Arsenal, led by Tom Cruise's Stacee Jaxx character in 2012 Warner Bros movie "Rock of Ages." Many of the scenes were shot at Revolution Live. Sullivan also plays in the '80s tribute band [Skin City Angels](#).

Sullivan says that in the last five years, the tribute trend has begun to attract musicians who have won Grammy Awards and played on major tours.

"You ask any of them who are still eating musician's soup — meaning they get up, feed their cat and have to go off to some sort of gig to stay in shape — they will tell you a tribute band is where to find a lucrative income, if you find the right band, and keeps you relevant and working," he said.



Brev Sullivan, left, Rina Miranda, Jill Minor and Crystal Fawn perform as Rock of ABBA at Galuppi's in Pompano Beach. (Jennifer Lett/Sun Sentinel)

Sullivan's first experience in the genre came about a decade ago with an '80s tribute band. In the first song of his first performance, he got the religion.

"I saw a glow come over people's faces. They had not heard that music in so long and their eyes lit up. They all became little children for two minutes, almost tears in their eyes, because they were getting to hear that song

again in the way that it should be played,” Sullivan said. “That moment can exist if you’re up there for the music and not the money.”

Gene therapy

When it comes to preparation and dedication, KISS Alive is on a different level, where performance days (50-60 a year) often run 14 to 16 hours, including the four hours it takes Andrew Goodpaster to paint his face and climb into towering Gene Simmons boots.



Erik Winger, left, Jim Cullen and Andrew Goodpaster get ready for a recent KISS Alive concert at Galuppi's in Pompano Beach. (John McCall/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

John Carlazzo, as Paul Stanley, lives in Port St. Lucie. Erik Winger (Peter Criss), of Orlando, and Jim Cullen (Ace Frehley), of Stuart, are other members.

Goodpaster lives in Springfield, Mo., where he works for FedEx.

“John and I didn’t know this thing was going to blow up. I offered to come down to fill in for a couple of gigs and all of a sudden the band kind of takes off,” Goodpaster said before a recent show at Galuppi’s. (For the record, he passed the tongue portion of the audition: “I’m blessed in that department. Nothing like Gene is, but I get by with it.”)



Andrew Goodpaster, left, and John Carlazzo perform with KISS Alive at Galuppi's in Pompano Beach. (John McCall/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

A gregarious quartet, the men of KISS Alive do not mind getting close to their fans. Winger, an opera major at Carnegie Mellon University, does Criss' rendition of "Beth" and hands out flowers at the edge of the stage. Goodpaster and Carlazzo are popular with selfie-taking fans at the post-concert meet-and-greet, which can run more than an hour.

So Goodpaster is a stickler about visual details when it comes to makeup and gear. Hence his expenditure this year of \$7,000 for two vintage guitars, both to satisfy himself and exacting fans.

"We call them KISS nerds, and it's not a derogatory term," Carlazzo said. "We love them, but they'll say, 'That pick guard is not the same pick guard that Gene had.' We try to be as authentic as we can."

It's all worth it, Carlazzo said.

"It's super intoxicating, the crowd reaction. The energy is palpable," he said. "It's so much fun, because you watch people having a good time because you're giving them a place to have a good time."

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