

Blues artist takes a reggae detour

By Jim Carnes -- Bee Staff Writer



Rusty Zinn's latest recording will combine reggae and soul.

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One love, one heart - that's the theme you'll hear in much of the popular music of Jamaica. It's a theme that Rusty Zinn has taken to heart. His one love is music.

Zinn, 35, was born in Long Beach and grew up in Bonny Doon, just up the coast from Santa Cruz. "It was kind of isolated, and I

think that's one of the reasons I became so passionate about music," said Zinn, who now lives in Sacramento. Growing up, he listened to the radio, to shows his parents liked, particularly the rock and rhythm-and-blues music played on the Wolfman Jack broadcasts. Later, he branched out into the more-polished soul sounds of the Spinners and the Stylistics. When he started playing guitar at 17, his passion was the blues.

"I can't pick up a guitar without squeezing some blues on the strings," he said. "In the past 10 years, I've been singing real steady, but the guitar thing - I can't get away from the blues. The blues is the basis for everything."

Zinn has been performing for nearly two decades and has shared the stage with some of the great blues musicians, including pianist Pinetop Perkins and harmonica players Snooky Pryor, Cary Bell, Junior Wells - and Rick Estrin of Sacramento's jump-blues band Little Charlie and the Nightcats.

"I really put Rick up there with the best," Zinn said.

When Zinn performs tonight at The Palms in Winters, fans might be surprised at what they hear. Zinn's latest recording - to be released on Bad Daddy Records in July - is with the famed Jamaican reggae group Soul Syndicate. The band has recorded with such reggae legends as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and the Mighty Diamonds.

When Zinn moved to Sacramento, he lived for a couple of years in a cottage behind Estrin's home. They've become good friends and have written some songs together. Zinn said his new musical tack is "not Rick's bag, but he's given me the thumb's up."

Indeed, Estrin praised Zinn's contemporary, reggae-influenced soul direction. "The last couple of years, Rusty has really found his original voice," Estrin said.

For many years, Zinn toured incessantly. "I have no job skills at all," he said. "I've always played music. That's all I know how to do, and I've hung in there through good times and bad."

Eventually, he got burned out. "I actually stayed home most of 2004," he said. "I got rid of my van that I had put about 200,000 miles on, and I just worked on writing music.

"For years, I've been wanting to bust out with other influences, and I just decided to be brave and do it.

"I was lucky enough to get hooked up with a label that would give me the freedom to do that," he continued. "I had been into reggae for years, and I just started exploring soul-influenced reggae music. The new project (the recording doesn't have a name yet) is the result of about a year of just sitting down and writing new material."

The Palms date is a chance to perform his new music live for a basically hometown crowd. It won't require a lot of travel to get to Winters. Zinn said he wasn't sure if he was ready to get back on the road.

"In July I'm doing a festival up in Toronto, and occasionally I'll fly out overseas and do one or two gigs," he said. "But at the moment, I'm not ready to do the full-blown tour thing again."

There is talk of Zinn performing some shows with Soul Syndicate. "We're labelmates now," he noted, "and the vibe was so amazing when we were in the studio."

Blues fans shouldn't despair at his new direction, Zinn said. "When those great reggae guys like Tosh and Marley played, they hired American blues guitarists to support them. Blues is the basis of everything.

"I have my ears open to all kinds of music. If it's got heart and it moves you, that's all that matters."