

Blue Combo

This popular Tulsa jazz group is making airwaves internationally, and appearances regionally with tunes even your mother would love.

by Walter Kruse

The songs sound familiar and it's even easy to dance to the good solid beat. But is this band covering some old song or is this an original?

According to guitarist Rusty Miller, if Tulsa's jazz group, Blue Combo, is on track—you won't be able to tell the difference between the vintage tunes and the band's original compositions.

"We consider ourselves an obscure cover

band," says vocalist Rebecca Ungerman. "The 'Big's' and 'Louis's'—we like those."

All five members of Blue Combo draw inspiration from a variety of musical influences including Louis Jordan, Big Mama Thornton, Big Maybelle and Louis Prima. "There's really not enough paper on your clipboard to fill up with all the stuff we listen to and are influenced by," says Miller. "All of us are really into this cool, old stuff."

Blue Combo plays jump, jive, jazz and early R&B with a taste of swing thrown in

for good measure. The band is equally at home in small venues such as Mezza Mediterranean or on stage in a big hall like Cain's.

"We've been lucky. We can play a lot of different rooms and still do our exact same style—the same sound," says Miller. "We can go from playing Bodean's to the Bowery to a festival stage with the same material."

The band originally formed in 1990 and, like most groups, has been through several incarnations and musical influences. A major turning point came three years ago,

when Ungerman sat in and sang a few songs. Since that night, her earthy, sometimes raw, sometimes belting, high-energy voice has fronted the four sidemen. Together, the band returned to the bluesy jazz and R&B that they all love.

Booked an average of four nights a week, Blue Combo plays clubs, private parties and fund-raising events from Memphis to Kansas City to Texas. One of its goals is to continue branching out, playing more regional gigs. "We're looking forward to doing more (blues) festivals," says Ungerman.

Additionally, both its CD, *Sassy Sauce*, and MP3s from its Web site (<http://www.bluecombo.com>) are getting played as far away as Europe and Australia.

"We're using technology to get the music out there," says Ungerman. "Tommy Waggoner (bass player) has worked hard to get us on international Web radio stations." That led to a call from the BBC for a copy of the CD and a review in *Living Blues* magazine.

Even though most members of the band still hold down "day" jobs,

Ungerman and Miller say that the love of the music along with peanut M&M's and strong coffee holds them together.

Apparently, the band strikes a chord with its audience—appealing to a variety of age groups with both the old and original material. "I think we've spanned the (age) gap," says Ungerman.

Miller agrees, "I'm playing in a band that my mother likes." ■



Blue Combo is Rusty Miller, Steve Elmore, Rebecca Ungerman, Robby Armstrong and Tommy "Tex" Waggoner.