

Suggs keeps salty flavor in Christmas concert

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"Sea oats anchor the shore, and the sand crabs shuffle just like some people I know..."

So unfolds the lyrics from musician Del Suggs' tune "Magic Chair" — an ode to Panhandle living which was listed as number 11 on the Best Trop Rock Songs of all time by KBEC 1390, beating out Jimmy Buffet's "Son of a Son of a Sailor." Some call it Trop rock, but Suggs refers to it saltwater music. It's the soundtrack you want as you relax in the midst of sand and waves on a warm summer day, and is the sound where he has found his niche as a sixth generation Florida musician from Panama City.

"When Jimmy Buffet came along it was so thrilling to hear someone writing songs about the things I could relate to," says Suggs. "Here's somebody writing songs about the everyday things in life like going sailing and to the beach. That opened a whole new door for me."

For the past 31 years, Suggs and his friends have hosted an annual Christmas concert that has become a Tallahassee staple. Not wanting to play anything the same way twice, they began arranging their own Trop rock-infused holiday classics such as a samba ukulele version of We Wish You a Merry Christmas and reggae inspired Deck the Halls.

The Almost Christmas CD came about after multiple requests after shows of where attendees asked where they could find and take home these unique arrangements. The CD features Suggs alongside vocalists Danica Winter and Mimi Hearn, bassist and keyboardist David Murphy, guitarists Jerry Thigpen and Pierce Pettis, and many more. Suggs is proud of the CD and believes it to be the perfect addition to any collection as well as a gift to give this season.

Suggs is especially proud of his song "Broken Places," his poetic take on hurt and healing. He tries to write universally based off Florida locales and will task himself with "assignment writing."

On a flight to Hartford, Connecticut, for a show, Suggs assigned himself to write an Irish song for his friends in a Celtic band. Touching down on the landing strip "High Above the Hills of Sligo" was created, revolving around an Irish myth of Suggs' fabrication, and was eventually recorded and performed. When Suggs teaches songwriting classes, he often gives people random rhymes and 10 minutes to write.

"It's amazing what you can do if you have to fill in the blanks," says Suggs. "Take four pairs of rhyming words and write a verse using those words which will begin to create a story, and that's what creativity is all about."

During high school, he played in a touring rock band called The Haze, for Jimi Hendrix's Purple Haze. Not many teenagers can say they had an agent and booking agency, but Suggs toured with his band mates all over the south before they had driver's licenses, relying on their college-aged tour manager for a ride.

He also holds a Master's in Higher Education and has shifted his career towards his passion for public service, giving sessions on leadership and programming to teach college students how to lead their clubs



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If you go

What: Del Suggs and Friends Almost Christmas CD

Where: Available for purchase online at www.saltwatermusic.com or in stores at Beethoven & Company, 719 N. Calhoun St. Ste E

Cost: \$10.99-15

Contact: For more information, call 850-894-8700 or visit <http://www.saltwatermusic.com/works.htm>.

and organizations.

"I think college is the last time in your life that you can be truly open," remarks Suggs. "You can be an idealist and make choices that can redirect your life. It's really great to be a part of that and to help people learn and grow."

Suggs always looked up to other solo artists like Mac McAnally who showed him amazing ways of communicating with audiences. Musician Gamble Rogers became a mentor that encouraged him "to never underestimate the power of a prepared performance." Other influences were Dion DiMucci, a doo-wop from the '50s and early '60s who Suggs saw perform in Gainesville.

"I don't think I have ever been so mesmerized by a performer onstage," says Suggs of DiMucci.

Onstage, Suggs plays through his set as a storyteller, connecting with the audience between songs to entertain. He attributes this skill to touring primarily as a solo artist where one can't turn to a lead guitarist and simply have them take it away.

The largest audience he ever played for was in Wakayama, Japan, when Governor Lawton Chiles asked Suggs to represent the State of Florida at the 1996 World Music Festival. As the penultimate act and only musician from North or South America, the experience remains one of his most memorable moments onstage. He participates in numerous benefit concerts every year to raise awareness for various organizations, and every year since 1981 takes to the stage at the Florida Folk Festival.

"It's a marvelous event all based around the music of Florida and the different cultures that live and exist here," says Suggs. "Florida has the most amazing library of songs about the state. There are songwriters that do nothing but write songs about the town they live in and the people they know and the things they've done. There's not another state like it."

"The great thing about hearing a cover song is that you already know the music, but you hear it fresh," said Suggs, who especially enjoys the tropical twists on a Florida Christmas. "People who come back time after time say that this Almost Christmas show and music puts them in the spirit and that's a wonderful thing. It's nice to be a part of someone's tradition."



AL HALL

Del Suggs has been performing with friends for 31 Christmas concerts.

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