


Marquee



ERIC MINTON

CATCHES THE COLD

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Television and Entertainment Guide for the Mississippi Gulf Coast

cover story

The Cold heats up the South

By ERIC MINTON
MARQUEE MUSIC WRITER

To appreciate the impact The Cold has had on New Orleans is to experience the rock band at a Catholic Youth Organization dance. Anywhere from 800 to 1,400 people, most in their early or mid-teens, crush against the stage, doing dances from the early 60s such as the Pony, the Swim and the Shake and imitating their idols on stage. A majority of the audience sings along to a majority of the band's originals and count off during breaks in a song.

At one dance three girls—one dressed in a leopard-spotted miniskirt—climb onto storage lockers by the stage and dance, resembling caged go-go dancers with Gary Lewis and the Playboys.

A group of kids, five girls and two boys, excitedly surround The Cold's manager, Bruce Spizer, and implore him for a meeting with the band. When Spizer turns down the request, they ask him to get autographs. One girl pulls out two crumpled \$1 bills and offers to pay him for an autograph.

After the concert a crowd of girls jockey for position outside the dressing room door. When they learn the band is leaving through another door, they run out of the building to intercept the stars.

One group of girls, all in their early teens, is lucky. They run across the floor to an older girl, screaming and squealing that they talked to Vance DeGeneres, the bass player. One of the girls can't talk, her face streaked with tears. Vance shook her hand.

The Cold is the most popular group in New Orleans. Ask just about anyone in southern Louisiana, and if they don't like The Cold, they at least have heard of them. Jazz enthusiasts, punk rockers and lovers of Bach are familiar with the group.

What's happening in New Orleans, the band, and their fans, hope will happen nationwide. Already the band has generated inquiries and isolated excitement around the country, and gigs throughout Louisiana, in Jackson and Destin, Fla., have widened their audience base. Two singles on their own record label have received airplay on commercial stations in New Orleans, a first for a local band without a national label. The singles are also popping up on the airwaves and in stores around the country, including Bebob Record Shop in Biloxi.

Next weekend, The Cold will make its debut on the Coast with a Saturday night show at The Factory in Biloxi.

The Cold's popularity can be measured in talk, and not just that of young teen-agers:

► "Their stuff is certainly as good as what you hear on the radio," says Dyan Keating, 19, a music major at Southeast Louisiana University.

► "The audience ranges from teeny boppers to preppies to people that look like they just walked out of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. That wide-range appeal is what will push them nationally," says Lynda Bohannon, 19, a public relations student at Tulane University.

► "They are the best original band in New Orleans. They're the only band I will come to see and unwind with after-budget meetings," says Craig Cason, a 28-year-old geologist for Gulf Oil.

► "They are professional, they put on a good show, their songs are very catchy," says Jerry Lousteaux, music director at WEEZ, B-97 radio in New Orleans.

► "As far as in the past 10 or 15 years, The Cold has



Chris Luckette, Barbara Menendez, Kevin Radecker, Vance DeGeneres and (front) Bert Smith

caused more excitement than any other group in New Orleans," says Bob Mitchell, program director for WTLX radio in New Orleans.

If talk isn't impressive enough then the figures are. The Cold usually brings in 700 to 1,000 people for a nightclub performance. At \$4 a person, the group averages about \$2,000 a night, according to DeGeneres. Though they won't reveal how much they are making, Spizer can give a fairly good indication: The band members do not hold other jobs, and the band is out of debt. They support a publicist and two roadies on salary and pay other assistants when they are needed. Spizer, who works as a clerk for the Louisiana Supreme Court, and road manager Cliff Derbins are paid on a percentage basis.

Their first single, "You," was released last August and has sold 8,000 copies. The second single, "Mesmerized," has sold 5,000 copies since its release in late February. A third record is due in about three weeks.

To define their popularity is easier than defining their music. There is a tendency to list them as new wave, but new wave fans disagree and punks won't claim them. Fans say they are 60s and 60s music combined. Several claim their mothers like the band because they have a sound reminiscent of the 60s.

The band is primarily influenced by the big beat and Mersey beat sounds of the early 60s, but an open-minded approach to new material and the mesh of individual skill levels provide the uniqueness of their music and the confusion in labeling them. They call themselves "power pop."

Vance DeGeneres, 26, plays bass. Perhaps the most talented member of the band musically, DeGeneres has played guitar and keyboards for many years before settling on bass when The Cold formed a year and a half ago. He also served a stint as a radio disc jockey and was co-creator and the original Mr. Hands of "The Mr. Bill Show," on *Saturday Night Live*. He presently is embroiled in lawsuits over his role in the films.

The group's publicist, Ruth Presslaff, says that around New Orleans, DeGeneres is known as the best white bassist in the city, and mention of his name comes "in the same breath" as Paul McCartney. But statements like that lead to a barrage of jokes from the whole group about how long someone can hold their breath while mentioning the world's bass players. The Cold is a rather modest bunch of musicians.

"She asks the question, 'Name two white bass players, one from New Orleans and one from England,'" DeGeneres responds. "It doesn't really mean anything after that."

"I've got a long way to go," he admits when pressed about his skills. "I'm taking lessons from a jazz bassist, stand up bass. As far as a rock bassist I'm pretty good."

Chris Luckette, 22, plays drums. An experienced drummer, he, too, is recognized as an outstanding talent

in The Cold. He and his wife Dawn have an 11-month-old daughter, Amber. "She plays kazoo," Luckette says. Luckette began playing drums by copying the drumlines played to create dramatic tension on television shows. He moved to a heavy metal style, then worked toward jazz and played in a concert band in school. He landed a job as drummer for a New Orleans new wave band called Normal that went to New York and broke up.

He returned to New Orleans and two weeks later got a call from DeGeneres. After listening to The Cold's musical ideas, he joined. "The Cold is a more open group [than Normal]," Luckette says. "They accept anything" musically, he says, and with that The Cold can succeed where Normal did not.

Barbara Menendez, 21, plays organ. When she's away from the organ singing lead, though, she becomes the focal point of the group, dancing, jumping, gesturing, tugging at her miniskirt or parochial school uniform, and pouring out the strongest vocals of the group. With training in acting, she puts on an energetic performance throughout a show.

Her background in singing isn't as formal. "I come from a singing family," she says. "We would go out to eat at a restaurant and the whole family would get in the car and we'd all sing the whole way there."

When the other band members deride her about that, she retorts: "I'm telling you, I had one of those corny Brady Bunch families."

Her education on keyboards is even more dubious. When she was a child she took piano lessons, but never stuck with them. As The Cold was formed, she says, DeGeneres taught her the basics of the organ. Now she's taking lessons. The improvement shows in comparing the group's early songs, which has Menendez pounding out chords, to their later material, in which she plays more melodies.

Kevin Radecker, 26, plays lead guitar. An original member of the new wave band Totally Cold, which evolved into The Cold, Radecker graduated from the University of New Orleans, majoring in communication and pursuing an acting career. His musical background is spottier than Menendez's.

In the early 70s, he says, he bought a \$10 acoustic guitar and learned two chords, C and G. "I looked for songs that had just C and G," he says. "When I got into the band I picked up F and D chords and was intomining at that time."

Turning a little more serious, Radecker, whose leads are a key part of the band's melodies, says his lack of musical background helps the group. "I'm unsophisticated musically and Vance is sophisticated and that helps because I'll come up with an idea that just doesn't make sense. It may contribute to the sound we get in some of our songs—a lot of wild chord changes."

Bert Smith, 28, plays rhythm guitar. He also was a member of Totally Cold and a graduate of UNO in See COVER STORY, Page 19

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communications. Married to Laura Nell of Bay St. Louis and supporting 14-month-old Leigh, Smith tried a stint in journalism before joining Totally Cold and learning to play the guitar.

But whereas his limited guitar skills contribute little to the melodies, his position in the rhythm section is a strong one. He has played the drums since he was 10, and he applies his proficiency in drumming to his guitar work. "I know a lot about rhythm and punctuation in music, and that helps me a lot since I'm mainly a rhythm guitar player," he says.

Pulled together, they form a tight unit. Everybody sings lead, everybody sings harmony, everybody writes songs, everybody is an integral part of the stage show.

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"Our songs are very concise," DeGeneres says in describing the music. "It has a lot of beat, very, very strong [rhythm] backbone, good chord-structure, good melody and nice tight harmonization. That pretty much sums up what we do."

Smith describes them as a vocal band. Though the music is strong, their stage show generates the most excitement, whether at a CYO dance or in the clubs. In the clubs they open with a taped intro featuring "Out of Limits" recorded by the Ventures in the mid-'60s. As soon as the tape goes on, and before the band appears, the crowd begins cheering.

When the band plays, heads start bobbing and people sing along. Cameras flash. It is usually an orderly crowd for the entire show ranging in age from the drinking limit to mid-'30s. "I think we see more of the professional people than say the blue collar workers," manager Bruce Spizersays.

What the audience experiences is an energetic show: Menendez' constant outpouring of movement, Smith and Radecker jumping and skipping across the stage, DeGeneres stepping around, staring at cameras or people in the audience. Even Lockette, confined to his wall of drums, generates excitement with his intensity.

Because of their stage show, certain fads have evolved in the audience, primarily tied to Menendez. When she imitates mechanical movements, the audience does the same. When she's twirling her hands to tell the soundman to turn up the monitor, the audience does the same. A common dance for women at a Cold concert or show is to grab their skirts or pants while dancing.

"I can't get out some of the notes unless I pull down on my skirt," she says. She wears the short skirts on stage because they are more comfortable for her wild dancing, mostly steps and styles of the '60s. But the dancing is not choreographed. "Most of it's just because I'm so high strung—nervous energy."

But the entire group stresses that they are a band; they do not want to be promoted as a "Barbara and the boys" unit. Spizer says that if they land a contract with a national label, they will not alter The Cold's composition.

They also don't plan to change their music for a record company, though DeGeneres says they do want to bring in an outside producer for their first album. Sticking to their style and music, they all say, shouldn't hurt their chances of getting a contract.

"We think our music is commercial as it is," Smith says. "Not because we write commercial songs but because the music we like happens to be, I think, the music everybody would like."

"We figure New Orleans is like a microcosm of the national market. If we can do it here, we can keep the same thing in any city in the country."

"Some girl came up to me last night," Menendez says. "She's from New York and she said everybody's talking about us in New York."

"Really?" the other band members respond, and after a moment of silence, pondering the prospect: "She's a liar." "That's what I thought," Menendez

says.

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"For the type of band they are, without the big wheels of a national label promoting them, they have gotten an exceptional response," says Bob Kranes, assistant to the program director at WLIR in Long Island, N.Y. The station has been playing their first two releases "You" and "Three Chord City," which have sold at least 50 copies in New York, according to Spizer.

KWUR in St. Louis, the Washington University radio station, has also been playing "You" and "Three Chord City," as well as "Measmerized." According to station manager Bill Morris, the response to all three have been good, particularly "Three Chord City."

"If they get the proper company behind them, there's no reason in the world they can't be a top band in the national market," says Bob Mitchell, program director at WTLX in New Orleans.

Phil Zachary, program director at WQVE in New Orleans, agrees. "There's got to be more to The Cold than meets the eye. One big thing they've got going for them is that they are in a big radio market with four major radio stations. And they are the only act in town getting airplay."

However, the band still sees difficulty in entering the national scene. "It's a very slow process to get worked into the market," says DeGeneres. "We're very lucky we're worked into the New Orleans market."

Recording an album is their next goal. Spizer figures the band should have a contract by the end of the summer, saying several companies have expressed interest in the group.

When asked how far they want to go, the jokes begin again. "To the top of the topper," Smith says. "I figure I'll make a couple of albums... then cross into jazz," Lockette says.

Getting serious again, Radecker responds: "If you don't make it out of New Orleans, your stuck as a local band. I think it's everybody's eventual goal to make it nationally, to have a national hit. That's where the money is, that's where the fun is."

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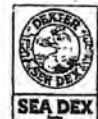


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