

# Bands on Board

**JEZ sets sail on “the world’s greatest floating music festival” and gets a behind-the-scenes look at the Atlanta artists who help keep the boat rockin’**



Passengers enjoy one of the numerous concerts on the Lido Deck.

**M**aybe it's the incredibly talented and interactive bands playing at all times. Or perhaps it's the idea of sailing the tropical seas on a Carnival cruise ship with 2,500 music lovers. Or it possibly could be the surreal atmosphere of rock stars and their fans coexisting equally with no obsessive antics in sight.

As far as what makes the **Rock Boat** a cruise that almost completely sells out before tickets are even available to the public, I'm going to go with all of the above. Commonly referred to as “the world’s greatest floating music festival,” the cruise began as rock group **Sister Hazel**’s revolutionary idea to reserve half of a ship for their fans. It has grown to become an experience that makes travelers say, “I would have kept a diary, but no one would have believed me.” As one of the lucky Rock Boat 2007 passengers, I couldn't have said it better myself.

When Sister Hazel created the original Rock Boat (then called “Festival at Sea”) in 2001 with **Dexter Freebish**, they had no inkling of the type of cultlike following it would gain. They had no idea that just a few years later, multiplatinum bands **Better than Ezra** and **Collective Soul** would be signing on, along with more than 30 others. “No one knew what to expect [at first], but every year, there's more people, more bands and more camaraderie overall,” says **Jeff Beres**,

Sister Hazel bass player. Camaraderie is an understatement. From unscheduled artist **Marc Broussard** giving a surprise performance during the Better than Ezra concert, then performing at the Turks and Caicos beach party the next day, to Atlanta's own **Francisco Vidal** and **Zac Brown** spontaneously jamming within hours of boarding the ship, the artist interaction was anywhere and everywhere in the purest, most unadulterated form. “It's a musical haven,” says **Dean Roland** of Collective Soul. **Alan Schaefer**, lead singer and guitarist for **Five Star Iris**, a band that draws inspiration from fellow Atlantans Collective Soul, echoed Roland's thoughts, saying, “It's a floating music utopia. Where else can you put 2,500 music fans together with concerts, drinking, etc. and have everyone be at peace?”

With such a flawless product and so many parties involved, credit is due everywhere, but it must be said that our city deserves a large slice of the praise pie. Atlanta-based entertainment company **Sixthman** pulls off the Rock Boat perfectly every year, and a third of this year's total artists were either from Atlanta or call it their second home. And, although all the bands and artists on the boat blew me away, I couldn't help but spend most of my time with our hometown headliners.

## THE BIG PLAYERS

### COLLECTIVE SOUL

Clearly one of the biggest draws this year, our boys from Atlanta brought their superstardom on the boat for the first time, along with throngs of die-hard fans. With an album due out this summer after a three-year hiatus, Atlanta's favorite rock group took the Rock Boat by storm, showing the world that they're back on the scene (as if anyone ever thought they'd left). The guys surprised fans with a few tracks from the new album, but stuck mostly to their classic hits, including the infectious "Home" and classic ballad "The World I Know."

Because the band consistently topped the pop-rock charts in the '90s and couldn't be a more attractive group of guys if they tried, I had to know if they were worried about crazed groupies. As a whole, the guys agreed they were a little concerned about the lack of separation between the bands and the fans, but were pleasantly surprised. "Sometimes you just want space, you just want to be able to do things like brush your teeth before running into thousands of fans," lead singer **Ed Roland** says. "But, somehow [on the Rock Boat], the fans and Sister Hazel have set this tone that the egos are left on the shore. You walk on the boat and everyone becomes equal." Guitarist **Joel Kosche**'s favorite aspect was "the way it's all set up. We get to hang out with other musicians that we wouldn't normally get to."

So, is another Rock Boat experience in Collective Soul's future? "As long as they'll have us, we would love to do it again—it's a blast," Roland says. The front man did experience motion sickness during the second night's packed-out performance ("I've never had motion sickness in my life, and I was about to die on stage."), so we hope for his sake that the Rock Boat isn't so rocky the next time Collective Soul decides to get on board.



Fred LeBlanc of Cowboy Mouth leads a crew of drummers in the grand finale show.

**"...the egos are left on the shore. You walk on the boat and everyone becomes equal."**

—ED ROLAND OF COLLECTIVE SOUL

### COWBOY MOUTH

"You want to know my three favorite parts of the Rock Boat?" asks **Fred LeBlanc**, drummer and lead singer for the New Orleans-based band. "The beginning, the middle and the end." Well, if that's the case, then LeBlanc's larger-than-life stage presence and high-energy, hard-hitting band kept the fans going wild throughout each of his favorite parts. The band that calls Atlanta their "second home," especially after recording some of their most recent album, *Voodoo Shoppe*, here after Hurricane Katrina hit, put on show after show for wall-to-wall crowds, and could be found lending their energy to other musicians in their downtime. As LeBlanc stood watching a Zac Brown Band performance in gym shorts and a cutoff T-shirt, the bongo drum onstage seemed to beckon him out of the crowd. Before you could do a four-count, he was banging away with the band.

As one of the only female bass players on the boat, **Sonia Tetlow**, who has a home in East Atlanta, kept her bandmates in line and in tune, inspiring the girls in the audience. With Tetlow's unique female contribution and a drummer as front man, nothing is "normal" about Cowboy Mouth, who refuse to play until the audience is screaming at the top of their lungs. With that being said, they are welcome in our city anytime.



Collective Soul wows the crowd with an incredible concert.



Zac Brown Band brings their country-rock sounds to the boat.



Bass player Rob Schaefer and lead singer/guitarist Alan Schaefer of Five Star Iris demonstrate their true rock style.

## BANDS ON THE RISE

### ZAC BROWN BAND

Talk about true fans. When the Atlanta-based Zac Brown Band was announced to perform on the 2006 Rock Boat, it wasn't a coincidence that the credit card orders from our city came pouring in. "We have the most awesome and loyal fans," says a grateful Zac Brown. "We can play three shows in a week, and they'll all show up." He's not joking. The band, which has given Southern rock a makeover with down-home country-inspired hits like "Chicken Fried" and soft ballads like "Whatever It Is," is about to seriously explode, and Atlantans will only be so lucky as to call them their own. With only one album out, *Homegrown* (along with a few other live recordings), fans have been itching for something new and finally will get it with

the band's second album, due out this summer. The guys are working with famed Nashville producer **Keith Stegall**, who is responsible for 41 No. 1 albums. "We're hoping to be No. 42," Brown says—which is not such a lofty aspiration for a band that refuses to (again in words of the front man) "do anything we can't reproduce live on stage." More national touring is definitely on the agenda for this low-key crew, and I can only imagine what that's going to mean for airfares out of Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

### FIVE STAR IRIS

From "country" to "punk" to "retro" to "indie," you can pretty much stick any word in front of "rock" these days and get away with it. Not that

the colossal span of rock music is a bad thing by any means, but sometimes you just want that soulful, hard (but not too hard), guitar-focused, good ol' rock 'n' roll, and Five Star Iris is just the remedy. Having been compared to **Foo Fighters**, **Collective Soul** and **U2**, this band from Atlanta may be a new kid on the block but clearly is here to stay. Their performances on the Rock Boat of contagious tracks like "Let it All Out" and "All I Am" (which was co-written by Collective Soul's Ed Roland) immediately won them new fans. "Since being on the Rock Boat [in 2006 for the first time], we've definitely gotten a larger fan base and come across those real music fans," drummer **Dan Fishman** says. Continues lead singer Alan Schaefer, "When we come back to Atlanta after touring all over, our local fans are even more excited to come see us."

## ONE-MAN (AND WOMAN) SHOWS

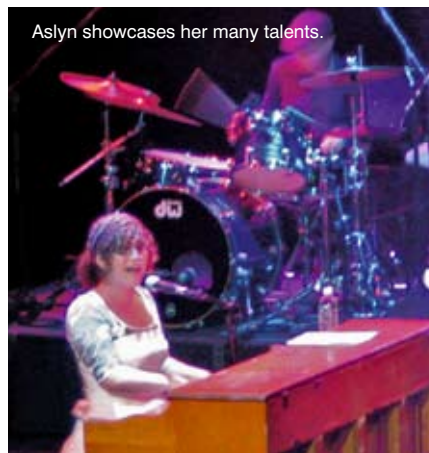
### ASLYN

From the fans to the musicians, everyone on board wanted a piece of this Atlanta songstress. Whether performing with Better than Ezra and Zac Brown Band, making cameos with a number of others or doing her own shows, Aslyn's girl power was present on every stage at one point or another. What makes her so special that every band I talked to seemed to bring her up as one of their favorites? Well, not only does Aslyn have the ability to channel her inner chick-rocker one minute and then tone it down with a sentimental ballad the next, but her piano skills also are unparalleled. Her first single, "Be the Girl," from her 2005 album, *Lemon Love*, was on the fans' request

lists, as well as "Wally," a song inspired by her grandparents' 55-year relationship. What's next for this pop princess with a twist? She's working on a new album and hopes to have it out by the end of the year, and she's already booked for the Rock Boat 2008. "Going on the Rock Boat is like you're a kid again going to summer camp. You get to see all these people you love to hang out with and play with that you don't get to see the rest of the year," she says. Well, it's a good thing Aslyn chose to get on board again, because I don't think the other musicians would have it any other way.

### JOSH KELLEY

Talk about appealing to both sexes. Josh



Aslyn showcases her many talents.

Kelley had the guys singing along to his rousing renditions of **Gnarls Barkley's** "Crazy" and **Justin Timberlake's** infamous *Saturday Night Live* skit song (which will remain nameless), while the ladies swooned over his heartfelt ballad about a past loved one, "Just



Marc Broussard and Francisco Vidal in an impromptu jam session.

Say the Word.” Kelley’s ability to blend funk and feeling with soul and sensitivity plus an über-talented band to back it up has made him not only a Rock Boat favorite for the second year in a row, but also a serious up-and-coming artist to watch. Originally from Augusta, Kelley also calls Atlanta home, and although he now spends most of his time in Los Angeles, he still comes back occasionally to visit and perform (his most recent show was at Smith’s Olde Bar earlier this year). The multitasking Kelley has a busy year in front of him: His fourth album comes out this summer; he’s getting married to our favorite *Grey’s Anatomy* resident, actress **Katherine Heigl**, in December; and he’s already booked for the Rock Boat 2008. “It will be my third year on the Rock Boat, and it’s just so awesome for my fan base,” Kelley says. “Every time I play the Rock Boat, my fan base gets an adrenaline shot. Other than it being a great business tool for musicians, it’s also a great place to test your artistic skills, watch other musicians, take notes.” But is it a romantic getaway as well? With Broussard actually getting married on the boat this year before it departed, then bringing his bride along for the ride, I had to ask Kelley if Heigl would ever join him at sea. “She definitely would if she wasn’t so busy working all the time; her career is really on the rise. But, she’s always said she’s wanted to go, so maybe next year,” he says hopefully. Can you say “It couple”?

### FRANCISCO VIDAL

You may recognize jack of all trades Francisco Vidal from Park Bench, the Buckhead bar he owns and graces the stage of on a regular basis.



Sam Thacker gives a stellar performance.

Vidal clearly enjoyed playing with everyone on the Rock Boat, from breakthrough group **Wideawake** to Atlanta singer/songwriter/producer **David Ryan Harris**. “There’s just no comparison to the atmosphere that Sixthman puts together,” Vidal says. “Not only do I love getting the chance to play with people I’ve always wanted to play with, but it really brings the fans and artists together.” Vidal and his band have been on the Atlanta scene for years and Rock Boat staples since 2003, playing original tracks like “Start Believing” and covering everyone from **Kenny Chesney** to **Tom Petty**.

### SAM THACKER

One of the youngest artists on the boat, Atlanta’s own Sam Thacker, definitely held his own. The 24-year-old’s dynamic vocals and sweet Southern charm impressed the younger ladies on the boat, of course, but undoubtedly turned heads of those of all ages and sexes. With one album out, *Above the Underneath*, and radio play in the beginning stages, we can expect to hear a lot from Thacker, but, like all the artists on the Rock Boat, he is best experienced live. His incredible talent and strikingly honest vocals, combined with the innocence factor, take over any venue he plays, whether it’s CJ’s Landing in Buckhead or the deck of a Carnival cruise ship. Was he intimidated at all by the big names on the boat? “Nah,” he says with a smile. “I’ve known a lot of these guys forever. And there’s definitely a lot you can learn from them.” —ASHLEY HESSELTINE



Josh Kelley performs during the grand finale.

## WHAT’S IN STORE AT SEA?

Rock Boat 2008 already is sold out, but there are plenty of other floating music festivals that will rock your world. **Lynyrd Skynyrd** and the **Barenaked Ladies** are just two of the bands that will host cruises next year. Is playing at sea the new wave in live music? Well, the bands love it and the fans can’t get enough, so, for now, the general consensus is yes. Not that playing concerts on land is becoming a thing of the past, of course, but when musicians and fans want to combine a tropical vacation with what they love the most, rockin’ the boat is the only way to go.

To learn how you can get on board with your favorite bands, log on to [sixthman.net](http://sixthman.net).