

Lifestyle

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Band on board.

By Liz Doup
Staff Writer

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Think of this story as a buddy movie without the car chase and the bad guys. Oh, and one more tiny difference: It's not a movie. It's the real deal. The stars are four South Florida guys -- Joe, Frank, Nicky and Rich. Been pals for 35 years, bonded by a love of riding waves and making music. When our movie opens it's 1970 and Joe DiDonna, 17, wants to head home after surfing near Pompano Pier. Needing help to push-start his aging VW, he seeks another surfer's aid. "I told him if he'd help, I'd give him a ride home," Joe says.

The surfer is Rich LaVoir. Turns out when he's not riding waves, he's making music with pals Nicky Ravine and Frank Ferraro in Frank's garage. This trio surfs all day, plays music all night. That works for Joe, who joins the group. The band called Blaze plays at Nova High's homecoming, where three of the guys are students, and at local dances. Heavy metal is their sound; Black Sabbath their idols.

Time rolls by and they grow up, head off to college and settle back in Broward. The day comes when they toast each other at their weddings -- two apiece. And congratulate everyone on the kids -- nine, including Frank's stepkids. They support each other through a trio of divorces and help Nicky through the death of his wife eight years ago.

Through the decades, they're in and out of more bands than they can count, sometimes playing together, sometimes not. Sometimes playing for paying customers; sometimes playing with friends just for fun. Then five years ago, Nicky, Frank and Rich formed a surf band called Cutback, reminiscent of the '60s. Joe joined them a couple years later. Now, our movie cuts to the guys today -- older, grayer, mellower -- rehearsing on a Thursday night.

This isn't the only time they hang out together. They still surf, calling each other when the waves are up and hitting Fort Lauderdale beach, just like when they were kids. Their only concession to time, at least at the moment, is Joe's sore arm, courtesy of his 4-year-old. "Ouch," he says, rubbing his aching limb after some furious drumming. "I've been playing a lot of Slip `N Slide with my son."

The guys are jamming in an office in Wilton Manors, where Nicky and Frank have spent 21 years together in the ad business. You'd think all this togetherness would get old, but they've worked it out. It's a lot like a marriage, and each guy has a role. Frank, 49, is both funny and diplomatic, an artful peacekeeper. Nicky, 51, with the long ponytail, is the artist. Rich, 49, an audio engineer, is the joker yet a serious musician. Joe, 51, with the phone company for 31 years, is the promoter.

Spend a little time with this crew and you'll see that humor helped build the relationship and fun is the cement that holds it together. Frank: "You get the same buzz from surfing and playing music. One is just warmer and drier." Rich points to a surfer T-shirt that Nicky created in the early '70s hanging in the room where they practice. The surfer image is a lot like what you see on their business cards now. Frank: "It's the only thing Nicky can draw." Laughter. A few quips later they launch into Walk, Don't Run by that quintessential surf band the Venturas.

The music is instrumental. No singer. No alpha dogs nipping at each other's heels. You think John and Paul could have figured this out. This group's idea of conflict -- every movie needs a little -- is stuff like what to name the group. In the beginning, Rich wanted Blow Hole, a surfer term, but you can see the problem. Cutback is surfer slang, too, describing a maneuver on the board. And it offers a nice little homage to the past. Cut ... back ... You get it, don't you? Then take their squabble over Endless Summer. Or Endless Strummer as Frank describes it. Same old cords make playing this ditty booooooring. But at a recent rehearsal Nicky really wanted to play it. After every song, he insisted on doing the dreaded tune. No. No. No, the other guys said. So let's just say Nicky got a little insistent. "I don't get angry, but I'm passionate about things," Nicky says. "His passion kept growing and growing," Frank says, ever the diplomat. Laughter. "So we played it." "I was also right," Nicky says.

Frank: "Nicky thought he was wrong once, but he was mistaken."

More laughter.

They've lived long enough, been through enough, to know the little stuff is just little stuff. Plus, a few simple rules help keep everyone on track. They don't sing, for one. "You don't want us to sing," Rich deadpans. They don't do weddings, for another. And they don't play Lynyrd Skynyrd's Free Bird, no matter who asks. Their ambition is big enough to warrant a Web site (cutbacksurfband.com) but not huge enough to kill the fun and friendship. Nicky: "You know what's good about getting old? Old friends."

The guys do have a movie-worthy dream, of course. It crystallized five years ago when Rich and Nicky and their current wives vacationed in Maui. The guys were at the hotel pool, strumming a little music on their guitars. They thought: We could buy a bar and be the bar band. Frank would join them, of course. And Joe? "Joe's gotta come, too," Rich says. "He'll have no other place to go."

More laughter.

Then they play a killer version of Sleepwalk, the perfect song for a slow romantic dance.

Music fades; this real-life movie is over for the night.

How's that for a happy ending?

Liz Doup can be reached at ldoup@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4722.

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