Sammy Hagar & Liquid Blue's La Jolla jam

The solo star and former Van Halen singer performed with the veteran San Diego band at a fundraising show at the Bishop’s School

By George Varga 7 A.M. APRIL 24, 2013

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In its 17-year-history, the San Diego band Liquid Blue has opened concerts for everyone from the Beach Boys and Joan Jett to The Guess Who and Eddie Money. Early last year, the three-woman, five-man group opened for Styx and veteran solo star and former Van Halen singer Sammy Hagar at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas.

On Saturday, Liquid Blue re-teamed with Hagar at The Bishop's School in La Jolla. Only this time, instead of opening the show, Liquid Blue accompanied Hagar at a Baja Knights benefit concert for the school.

Together, they performed two Hagar solo hits ("I Can't Drive 55" and "Mas Tequila"), two songs from his tenure in Van Halen ("Why Can't This Be Love?" and "Finish What Ya Started"), one song by Hagar's early 1970s band Montrose ("Rock Candy") and one Led Zeppelin classic ("Rock and Roll").

"Sammy played guitar on a few songs and on some he just sang," said Nikki Green, Liquid Blue's lead female singer. "He traded lines with me on the guitar/vocal scat part in 'Why Can't This Be Love?' It was a great moment."

One of San Diego's most successful cover bands, Liquid Blue has performed in 100 countries and done 15 tours of China, where its members sing in Mandarin. The group is also in the Guinness Book of World Records for having recorded its 2010 Billboard charting dance song, "Earth Passport," in nine languages.

Even so, performing with Hagar stands out for Liquid Blue, which does a free show at the Oceanside Pier Amphitheatre May 18 and plays May 24 at the Belly Up in Solana Beach.

"It certainly was a career highlight for us," said Scott Stephens, 53, Liquid Blue's manager and male lead vocalist. "I've been a Sammy fan since the Montrose days."
According to Stephens, the Bishop's School gig with Hagar came about through Marco and Janna Monroy, who are Bishop's parents. Marco Monroy is Hagar's business partner and arranged for him to perform at the fundraiser, the school's 28th such annual event.

"We performed last year at Sammy's Cabo Wabo (nightclub) in Cabo San Lucas, and Marco recommended us to Sammy after he heard us play there," Stephens said. "So, when it came time for this event at the Bishop's School, where Marco has children who attend, they called us up and said: 'Would you guys like to back Sammy?'

"We loved the idea. We knew it would mean learning his material and that it would be a one-off performance), but it certainly was worth it."

Liquid Blue made sure it was well-prepared for the collaboration, even before they learned that Hagar would not rehearse with them or join them for a pre-show soundcheck. On its own initiative, the band even went so far as to learn "Oh Yeah" by Hagar's post van Halen-band Chickenfoot.

"We had done quick recordings of all the Sammy songs we learned for the show and sent MP3's over to him on Friday so he could hear our arrangements," Green recalled.
"We had learned and recorded the six songs all in their original keys. I sang the leads to three and Scott did three. When we met with Sammy before the show to go over the set list, he said he always tunes down a half step. And he asked: 'Who sang the lead on "Oh Yeah"? Scott had sung it a half step higher than Sammy does it live, and Sammy was pretty impressed."

Stephens did not meet Hagar when Liquid Blue opened for him in Las Vegas, although Liquid Blue’s guitarist and bassist did. But the whole band got face time with him backstage prior to Saturday’s Bishop’s school benefit gig.

"He hung out with us for 20 or 30 minutes before the show," Stephens said. "He was a really nice guy and made his way over to each and every band member, without being prompted. He came in with his wife and just chatted and (joked) around with us. When we played, he sounded better than ever, like he was 25 or 35, not 65."

"We didn’t play ‘Oh Yeah’ with him, because he said he didn’t think the audience would know the song. We tried to convince him to do it. But when he was finished performing with us, we played the song and he was absolutely right. People wanted (to hear) stuff they knew."

What Liquid Blue also didn’t do Saturday, wisely, were any songs from Van Halen’s pre-Hagar era, when David Lee Roth was the lead vocalist.

"We do ‘Jump’ and ‘Panama’ in our regular set, but those are totally taboo with Sammy," Stephens noted. "I verified that when we played at Cabo Wabo last year, even though Sammy wasn’t there."

Did anyone suggest that Hagar, the maker of Cabo Wabo Tequila, might consider Liquid Blue as a name for a new alcoholic beverage line?

"No, but we should have brought that up with him," Stephens said.