

Songs of the Sea

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ABOARD THE CELEBRATION -- Something spooky started a few lyrics into "Seasick," Larry Joe Taylor's first song of the evening. The nightclub -- the whole dang thing -- began swaying to the beat.

Or did it?

An experiment proved Taylor's message was more than subliminal.

I placed my margarita on the table. The lime-green liquid tipped from side to side, almost spilling over the salty rim.

The nightclub *was* moving, and the tongue-in-cheek tune ("Oh, I got seasick/ It happened so quick") helped transform a sell-out crowd of 220 virtual strangers into fast friends on a five-day, music-themed party package aboard Carnival Cruise Line's Celebration as it began its journey from Galveston to Mexico's Cozumel and Calica.

Outside, there were no pickups, no asphalt parking lot, just a dome of glittering stars, a sweet sea breeze and gentle swells that rolled to the adventures waiting beyond the dark horizon. Inside, The Island in the Sky Lounge was devoid of the trademark of Taylor's usual venues -- sawdust on a honky-tonk dance floor. There was a hint of neon light, but that was for accent, not a glaring ad for beer.

Taylor billed it as his "Fourth Annual Coastin' & Cruisin'" outing.

But that's too modest a title for an excursion featuring six of the top singers and songwriters on the Texas and Nashville scenes swapping songs, telling jokes and enjoying themselves just as much as the fans who came from across Texas and as far away as Illinois and Virginia.

"It's the most fun thing we do every year," Taylor said. "We play three of the five days, and nobody who gets drunk has to drive home."

Theme cruises featuring authors or chefs and package discounts are nothing new. Music cruises with rock, gospel, soul and Grand Ole Opry members have been sailing for a couple of decades.

"They offer a cruise with much more value to the fans, as well as the artists," said Cherie Weinstein, Carnival's Miami-based vice president of groups. "It's a great opportunity for artists and fans to have an up-close and personal feeling, and it makes the cruise experience that much more enjoyable."

The new twist to music voyages is the number of Texas artists jumping aboard in the wake of cruise lines sailing from the Port of Galveston.

Taylor, one of more than a dozen Texans who have conducted music cruises, may be the most qualified to lead a sand and sun adventure.

A Beach Boys fan growing up, he turned to country music for fun and profit as an adult. "One day, I thought, Texas doesn't have any beach music," Taylor said. "So I wrote a couple of songs as a novelty. Then I wanted a couple more and started spending a lot of time at the coast doing research. I fell in love with it, and what started out as a lark became a fanatical passion."

About a decade later, Taylor's songs fill five albums, ranging from the whimsical fun of "Queen of the Redneck Riviera" and the honky-tonk dance tune "Two Steppin' on the Beach" to a serious study of those who make their

living at sea with "Shrimpin' and Skrimpin'."

Along the way, he single-handedly created a genre of music that he dubbed "coastal and Western." When people tell him he's "the Jimmy Buffet of Texas," he usually responds that he's "just the Don Ho of Port Aransas."

Indeed, he's a regular at such Port A hangouts as The Back Porch, Shorty's and the Third Coast Theater, and is planning his seventh annual Island Time Festival on Labor Day weekend.

Adding a cruise to the mix was a natural.

"I try to limit it to no more than 250 people so we can hang out with everybody," Taylor said. "That way we can all fit in the lounge and get to know each other -- plus we have about one entertainer for every 50 people."

Taylor has two rules for picking artists for the cruises -- they have to be good, and they have to be good friends.

As the ship plied the Gulf of Mexico on this trip, for example, relentless ribbing followed Richard Leigh's introduction of each of his songs, which he invariably related as a hit for Reba McEntire, Crystal Gayle or the Dixie Chicks. That's because his songs include McEntire's "The Only Man (I Never Knew,)" Gayle's "Don't It Make Your Brown Eyes Blue" and the Chicks' "Cold Day in July," among other tunes for Martina McBride, Tammy Wynette, Conway Twitty, Don Williams and scores more.

Joining the gibing was Keith Sykes, who once played lead guitar in Jimmy Buffett's band and wrote for the likes of Buffett, The Judds, John Prine, Roseanne Cash, Jerry Jeff Walker and Rodney Crowell.

Texas legend Steven Fromholz, who established himself on the outlaw country scene in the 1970s as one of the most respected songwriters around, told stories, cracked jokes and showed he's rocketing down the road to recovery from a stroke last year.

Others on the boat were Mike McClure, former lead singer for the Oklahoma band The Great Divide who struck out on his own last year with his country rock-tinged songs and acclaimed lyrics; and Davin James, a Mississippi-bred, Houston-based singer/songwriter steeped in country, blues and Southern rock.

Fans setting sail with them ranged from twentysomethings to grandpas; from college students to airline pilots; and from a systems analyst for the Department of Defense to aging hippies. Attire was just as eclectic -- cowboy hats, Hawaiian shirts, Bermuda shorts, boots and sandals.

Many are loyal fans who have been on every one of Taylor's four Coastin' and Cruisin' trips. Some barely knew of him, such as Christine Saalbach, who works at the personnel center at Randolph AFB.

"Making friends is a lot easier," Saalbach said of the cruise. She brought her daughter, Maggie Martin, 23, a technician at Animal Health Associates. "On the other cruises, the only time you were with the same people was at dinner. But when you're all in the same room, you all know you like the same music. And seeing people later, there's no lack of a launching point for a conversation."

Thomas Cochran, 25, a college student from Fort Worth, got to play guitar and sing with the artists in one of their rooms after a show. "I've been on other cruises before, and this is more fun than any other -- and it's the shortest," Cochran said. "It's the music, the people you meet, the camaraderie."

Artists also found rewards.

"I've never had people be so quiet and attentive before," said Leigh, who was making his first cruise. "Must be something about Texans and their love of music."

McClure appreciated the fact that he could mingle with fans over several days on and off the ship instead of playing one night and hitting the highway. "They are super nice and go out of their way to be nice to you," McClure said. "I only had to work a little bit, if you call it that -- drinking beer and singing three or four songs a night. It's like being on vacation with a couple hundred friends."

And the destination stops at ports such as Cozumel appealed to the artists as much as the passengers. McClure went snorkeling with his wife, Scotie.

Taylor liked the simplicity of a beach with no electricity and just a scattering of people at the palapa bars.

"Sometimes it feels like my whole life is a vacation," Taylor said. "And as long as that's the case, I'll be happy."