

7/25: Hot Tuna talk acoustic show, Jefferson Airplane

by **Michael Senft** - Jul. 17, 2012 10:46 AM

The Republic | azcentral.com

While Jefferson Airplane was taking flight in the late '60s, guitarist Jorma Kaukonen and bassist Jack Casady kept the group's Summer of Love psychedelia grounded in American roots.

Hot Tuna Acoustic

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, July 25.

Where: Mesa Arts Center, 1 E. Main St.

Admission: \$39.50-\$75.

Details: 480-644-6500, mesaartscenter.com.

With a background of country blues and folk, the pair provided a steady underpinning for the San Francisco supergroup. But when fellow Airplane pilots Grace Slick, Paul Kantner and Marty Balin launched themselves as Jefferson Starship, Kaukonen and Casady stayed on Earth, returning to their folksy roots as Hot Tuna.

And as their former bandmates have built cities on rock and roll, Kaukonen and Casady have built a loyal following through regular touring and a jam-band ethos, not to mention their expert picking. On Wednesday, July 25, Hot Tuna visits the Mesa Arts Center for an intimate evening of unplugged roots music. We recently spoke with Kaukonen about the current tour.

Question: Where are you speaking from?

Answer: Right now, I'm in Portland, Maine. We've just finished a few electric shows and are getting ready for a string of acoustic shows that Phoenix will be a part of. We did have some scares, though, last week from the storms. The ranch (Kaukonen owns a ranch in southern Ohio where he hosts music camps and guitar clinics) lost power, but thankfully we have generators. It did blow out all the cell towers though, so we were still pretty isolated.

Q: It seems Hot Tuna's electric shows are more the exception than the rule. Sort of the opposite of the Grateful Dead, who primarily played electric but would occasionally do acoustic sets.

A: The electric shows are more of an event. I played electric with the Jefferson Airplane because I had to, and I enjoyed experimenting. But I'm an acoustic guitarist at heart. When I want to play something purely for enjoyment, I'm going to pick up an acoustic guitar.

Q: You've been playing with Casady for almost 50 years. How have you maintained your musical relationship over such a long time?

A: We've been friends since 1958. We started as friends. Everything grew from that. And it's an unlikely friendship -- we're very different people. If he was involved in this interview, you and I wouldn't be able to get a word in edgewise. He has that much to say. But we respect each other as musicians and as men. And that's what is most important.

Q: Who's joining you and Jack this time?

A: Because it's an acoustic show, we'll only have Barry Midderhoff along, playing mandolin. For the electric shows, we also have a drummer, Skoota Warner.

Q: You released your first studio album in over 20 years last year, "Steady as She Goes." What prompted the return to the studio after so long?

A: After our last studio album (1990's "Pair a Dice Found"), it took us a while before we were ready to record again. We still toured, and we released several live albums, but we weren't ready to go in the studio. Then, by the time we were ready, the record industry had changed and no one was interested in a Hot Tuna record. I was still writing though, and still recording solo albums as well. So when I went to make my last solo album for Red House Records, I asked if they would be interested in a Hot Tuna album as well. And they were ecstatic. So we

went up to Woodstock, New York, and recorded at Levon Helm's studio. It was great, we had 20 years worth of songs to choose from.

Q: What was it like working at his studio?

A: We got to hang out with Levon, may he rest in peace, and record in this big cabin he owned, where he'd host his Rambles (star-studded weekend concerts). I guess they're still doing the Rambles there. It's a big open loft with no control room, so it very much had a live feel to it. It was the perfect storm of creativity.

I saw something on TV right after Levon died, that he'd battled back from cancer in the '90s, then fought it again. No one thought he'd ever sing again, and yet he did. And he came back and won two Grammys after everyone had written him off. Nobody had an encore better than Levon.

Q: Like the Band and the Grateful Dead, it seems Jefferson Airplane came from musically diverse backgrounds to create something unique. Was that what gave the music such power during the Summer of Love?

A: It was the formula for a successful pop band in San Francisco during the Summer of Love. We all earned our bona fides from different places. Jack and I came from this blues/folk background. We were just a bunch of guys and gals who loved making music. We didn't even think about becoming pro musicians, we just wanted to play music. Grace never dreamed she would be rock star.

Well, I did. Frisco was the center of pop culture in the '60s, that's why I moved there, to be a part of it.

Q: What's next after this tour?

A: I'm going to record another solo album, and we're already writing for the next Hot Tuna album. At our age, we can't wait another 20 years.