

# The Intelligencer

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## Psychedelic pioneers the Blues Magoos are back



Photo by Alan Rand

"I admit it, I'm having way too much fun," Peppy Castro (front) says of performing with the Blues Magoos again after 40 years.

Forty-eight years after their last (and only) hit, the Blues Magoos are back, and if your response to that earth-shattering bit of music news is, "Blues Who?" ... well, Peppy Castro isn't surprised.

When I confess to the band's original guitarist/vocalist that I hadn't yet had the chance to listen to the groundbreaking psychedelic group's comeback album at the time of our telephone interview two weeks ago, he laughs and says, "You and 99.9999 percent of the rest of the world."

"We're certainly not doing it to make a quick buck," Castro, 65, says from his part-time condo in Lakewood, Florida, his rapid-fire New York City accent and

boyish enthusiasm very much intact. "If anything, we're paying money, between the expense of the hotels and flying (drummer) Geoff (Daking) from wherever he's coming from.

"But every time we do stuff together, it's a lot of fun. Oh, my God, these old songs, they really hold up after all these years. They're fresh. They haven't been beaten to death over the last 40 years."

Still, why now? Why, more than four decades after their last album, did the Bronx-born Magoos release "Psychedelic Resurrection" last fall, a juicy, 11-track mix of re-recorded old songs and new material that evokes memories of their 1960s garage-rock glory? (Yes, I've since listened to the full album, and it's a lot of fun.)

And why is the band, which includes original members Castro (birth name Emil Thielhelm) and vocalist/keyboardist Ralph Scala and nearly original member Daking, back on the road playing live, including an upcoming performance Thursday at the Sellersville Theater?

"I think the fact that we're still alive has something to do with it," Castro says. "Ralph's retired from his career in pharmaceuticals, Geoff has always stayed in the business (as an acclaimed audio engineer) ... it was a timing issue. The fact is, nobody can accuse us of trying to be a flash in the pan again. We just decided, 'If it's fun, let's do it, and if it's not fun, let's not do it.'

"For me, it was probably more emotional than the other guys. I was a high school dropout. Getting to go back to that moment in time with the band has been so enjoyable. Ralph still sounds fabulous, Geoff still plays, I can still play and sing ... it's been a joy to rediscover what we once had as kids."

It didn't hurt that the band, which also includes new members Mike Ciliberto on guitar and Peter Stuart Kohlman on bass, finally regained the rights to its own songs.

"We didn't own our masters — the record company owned them," Castro says. "That's one of the things that took so long. We finally got our copyrights and publishing back. Literally for 47 years, people were ripping us off without even batting an eye. We decided, 'Let's not let these thieves rip us off any more.' "

## Dawn of a new sound

Even if you don't know the Blues Magoos by name, you'd likely recognize their hit — "(We Ain't Got) Nothin' Yet," which peaked at No. 5 on the *Billboard* chart in early 1967. That insanely catchy guitar-and-organ riff helped their debut

album, "Psychedelic Lollipop," reach No. 21 and firmly established the band as a pioneer on New York City's burgeoning psychedelic scene.

"Beyond a shadow of a doubt, we were at the forefront," Castro says. "People think of (psychedelic music) as a California thing, but our discovery of it never really happened because of what was going on in California."

Instead, it was a fortuitous accident that led to the Magoos' signature sound. The band had bought an Echoplex (a sound effects machine that used tape delay), and the guys were dismayed when it fell off a piano.

"We were making \$45 a week and we had pooled all our money and starved for a week to buy this \$250 Echoplex," Castro recalls. "We thought it broke, and our hearts sank. We plugged it back in, and it was making this ungodly (feedback) sound, but we liked it. We were smoking dope out of our minds and we thought, 'Whoa, that's trippy.' We moved the tape selector and changed speeds and it made an even weirder sound, and we started writing toward that sound." Soon, the Magoos had become staples at the Night Owl Café, playing six nights a week, four sets a night and jamming with the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Richie Havens.

The long-since-established Greenwich Village folk scene had to make room for a new sound, and even the folkies were embracing it.

Stacy Briggs, assistant Life editor of this newspaper, recalls discovering the Blues Magoos by chance in the Village in the mid-'60s.

"Four of us were on a road trip in a blue 1962 Chevy Corvair," he says. "I was heavily into folk music back then, so this music was like a major slap in the face when we heard it ... but we still liked it."

The Magoos signed with Mercury Records in 1966, and by '67 were opening for The Who and headliners Herman's Hermits on a U.S. tour.

"Those were magical times," Castro says. "There were totally intense crowds in the West Village, and the streets were packed. I haven't seen anything come down the pike as close to how potent the '60s were — musically, politically, socially, psychologically."

Of course, it didn't last. Not for the Magoos, anyway. A follow-up single, "Pipe Dream," got banned from radio play because of perceived drug references and failed to crack the Top 40. The original lineup had petered out before the end of the decade, and various other incarnations found limited success before the band folded, seemingly for good.

"When you're 17 and have a hit record, you've living the dream as a rock 'n' roll

star," Castro says. "I left high school with street smarts, but knew nothing of the business, nothing about how the world works. I never thought it would end.

"The band got this reputation as a one-shot wonder, and when people smell death ... we were basically left to fend for ourselves, and suddenly at the ripe old age of 19, I'm thinking, 'What am I going to do now that I'm a has-been?' "

Fortunately, the band members found success outside the Magoos. Castro ended up befriending actress Delores Hall and joining her as a lead in the Broadway production of "Hair." He has since played in a variety of bands, written hundreds of commercial jingles and composed songs recorded by Diana Ross, Cher and Kiss. These days, he's producing an off-Broadway version of "The Gong Show."

Scala moved to Hollywood, jammed with the likes of Gregg Allman and Gram Parsons and played in numerous bands, and Daking has built more than 20 recording studios for music, film and commercial production.

## Magoos once more

*"So many years have passed. But now we're back and on this journey. And now we're hoping that we can give your ears a burning."*

OK, so it's not Shakespeare. But that line, from the title track of "Psychedelic Resurrection," is a reminder that the Blues Magoos aren't taking themselves too seriously the second time around. The album even contains a new song about getting sick from bad Chinese food.

The guys are also at a point in their lives when they're not going to get caught up in any petty drama or band politics.

"The greatest joy in the world is to sit down with fellow musicians as partners," Castro says. "Now it's, like, 'I want to play this.' 'OK, you're the drummer, play whatever the hell you want.' Where, in the old days, it was, like, 'I don't like that part. That doesn't work.' Everyone was fighting for an identity or to be validated.

"It's fun going back to it now. I'm so mellow as a person, it doesn't even matter anymore. That's what I love, and that's what I bring to the table — whatever happens, just go with the flow. That makes it real and honest."

Things are so harmonious within the Blues Magoos family that all of the members who performed on "Psychedelic Lollipop" nearly 50 years ago contributed to the new album (former bassist Ronnie Gilbert and lead guitarist Mike Esposito are not part of the touring lineup but played on the record).

It helps that there's very little at stake — Castro knows there's little chance of a resurgence in popularity for the Magoos. So why not just have a good time and reminisce about a special era in all of their lives?

"People still look back at the Magoos as a one-shot wonder, but that record was groundbreaking," he says. "That guitar lick ... every guitar player in the world wanted to play that lick. How many people can have a hit record? I take it as a blessing."

**The Blues Magoos perform Thursday at the Sellersville Theater, 24 W. Temple Ave. in Sellersville. Show time: 8 p.m. Tickets: \$25, \$39.50. Information: 215-257-5808; [www.st94.com](http://www.st94.com).**