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Kelton's music shaped by blues tradition

By Greg Barr

Correspondent

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GALVESTON — Ask any musician if he wants to play a summertime gig outdoors along the Texas Gulf Coast and, inevitably, he'll answer with his own question: Is the stage covered?

For blues guitarist Gene Kelton and his band, a weekly gig for eight months at Clear Lake's Flamingo Café in 1992 turned into a music industry version of the "Survivor" TV series. Every Sunday, the band would haul their gear up a winding staircase to the bar's second floor and play a four-hour show outside, with the unmerciful Texas sun beating down.

"The audience was in the shade, enjoying their cold beer every week," said Kelton. "But we stuck it out while some other bands quit. After a while, some of the people started calling us a bunch of die-hards because we kept showing up."

The name stuck, and Mean Gene Kelton & The Die Hards have been soldiering on ever since, releasing two CDs in the past four years, and playing their own brand of southern-fried roadhouse blues 200 nights — or blazing hot afternoons — every year.

Kelton, who was born in Booneville, Miss., picked up the guitar when he was a teenager growing up in Liberty. But he was infused with a sense of true delta blues at an early age in Mississippi in the 1950s, living on a cotton plantation where his grandfather worked.

"Every weekend the black families would throw these big shindigs at a moonshine juke joint called Elmer Green's, and we'd go down to hear them," he recalled. "This was some real, primitive blues, with a washtub bass and drums made out of anything, and they'd do Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. Subconsciously, these were the licks I remembered when I started to play guitar."

Add in other early influences like the Rolling Stones, and an affection for the humorous lyrics of pop singer Ray Stevens and country performer Jim Stafford, and Kelton's blues fusion of serious licks and quirky lyrics was born.

Of course, considering that sexual connotations have always been a big part of blues lyrics, Kelton's most requested songs are, um,

steeped in tradition. And Kelton's most-requested tune at shows or blues radio stations, "My Baby Don't Wear No Panties," which reached No. 1 on the Internet World Music Chart, has become his blue trio's signature song, in a way.

"Sometimes women will buy underwear in bundles or something," said Kelton with a chuckle. "At one gig they must have thrown 50 panties at us. Man, the stage looked like a Laundromat after a tornado."

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What: Mean Gene Kelton & The Die Hards.

When: 9 p.m. tonight.

Where: The Balinese Room, 2107 Seawall Blvd., Galveston.

Cost: \$5.

Call: (409) 762-9696.