

Rockin' Down the HiWay to offer the best of the Doobie Brothers

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The Doobie Brothers Band was recently nominated for the 2020 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, after 50 years on the music scene. They've sold more than 48 million albums and have had 16 top-40 hits on Billboard's Charts.

And they're still touring.

But not everyone can make it to a live Doobie Brothers concert, nor afford the \$100-plus ticket price.

That's where Rockin' Down the HiWay comes in. The Doobie Brothers tribute band, headed by Tommy "T-Bird" King, will be performing at the Lucky 7 Casino on Nov. 9, at 350 North Indian Rd. in Smith River.

King said his band has been performing the Doobies' greatest hits for six years and was gobsmacked to hear the original group had just been nominated for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

“It’s amazing that such a popular band like the Doobie Brothers just got nominated. It’s beyond me why they didn’t make it a long time ago, especially with some bands already in there that aren’t rock and roll.

“The Doobies are still performing today, still selling out major venues. They’re fantastic, live. Their vocals are spot on. The vocals are fun. They’re just a fun band. Everyone should get to see them.”

King tries to bring a slice of that experience to his own shows with Rockin’ Down the HiWay. He has been performing professionally since the 1960s, having long since graduated from his bar band days.

But it was those early years when he perfected his craft and grew his appreciation of an engaged audience.

“You take the parts of the experience of bar bands — the long drive to a bar, get there two hours early, hauling the PA system, set up, perform two hours, tear down, be happy to leave there with a couple hundred bucks each,” King recalled.

“It’s not really about the money, it’s the experience. Where you hone your chops. Have a good time, get them to sing along.”

King also has incorporated an important lesson he learned from his father, who had played jazz trumpet since 1927 heavily inspired by Louis Armstrong. “One thing he told me is how important the intimacy is, to get in touch with the audience, make them feel welcome, feel special.

“We’ve taken that a step further in Rockin’ Down the HiWay. We make them feel like they’re a part of the success of the night.”

King, now 67, cobbled together a group of musicians from the Sacramento area to form his latest band, starting with a second lead singer, “Drivin’” Darren Wilson, from Chico, California. “He is very, very good. The demo you hear on our website, he sings ‘China Grove.’

“Our base player, “Jalopy Jeff” (Viducich), is amazing. Cadillac Jack (Hurst), he nails the signature licks on lead guitar. He has a tough tone and clean sound that fills the room,” King said.

The band is rounded out with Robert “The Roadster” Mills on drums and King himself on keyboards.

“I’m blessed to perform with guys who aren’t in it for money. They’re all seasoned musicians who’ve been performing since they were kids,” King said.

He has actually fronted several tribute and “theme” bands over the years. A theme band, he explained, plays songs revolving around a central style of rock. Like California Dreamin’ performed hits about the Golden State. Southern Rock Review performed Allman Brothers, Lynrd Skynrd, Marshal Tucker and 38 Special songs.

His first lineup with Rockin’ Down the HiWay started out performing the hits you hear on the radio while “rolling around and crusin’,” King said, like “Born to be Wild,” “Hitchin’ a Ride,” “Radar Love” and “I Can’t Drive 55.”

It was the Doobie Brothers' hits - "China Grove," "Long Train Runnin'" and "Jesus is Just Alright" - that were especially connecting with audiences. So, King has switched the emphasis on road songs to Doobie Brothers songs since 2012.

He credits his music stable owner, George Gosling of Tabletop Productions, for Rockin' Down the HiWay's booking success.

"We've been blessed to be able to perform at some of the best, most-sought-after venues in California and Nevada. Performing arts centers, theaters - which are all the rage now - festivals, county fairs, city concert series. And the Lucky 7, now," King said.

He added that a couple of other bands from Tabletop have sold out at the Lucky 7, including NightMoves, a Bob Seger tribute band.

The bottom line to a successful performance for a band, King said, is to work hard. "We've spent tens of thousands of hours practicing, getting the show ready.

"So, the feeling you get in front of an audience that has fun is priceless. I tell them, 'You made our night. When you're having fun, we're having fun.'"

Tickets to Rockin' Down the HiWay are \$25, available online at <https://conta.cc/2qL8W3p>. Doors open at 6 p.m. and music starts at 7:00.