

Unlikely Friendship.(weekly)

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Two musical paths came together with a version of "let's make a deal."

Lon Bronson grew up liking the band Tower of Power so much that he started his own band with the same horn-powered blend of funk, rock and soul.

When he finally got Tower co-founder Stephen "Doc" Kupka to come check out the Lon Bronson All-Star Band, the veteran bandleader enjoyed what he heard enough to offer Bronson three unrecorded songs.

"He said, 'I'm going to give them to you. The only stipulation is that you have to record an album,' " Bronson recalls.

"I just wanted to light a fire under him," confirms Kupka, who plans to help distribute the disc through his Strokeland Records label. "I'm really glad he's doing our tunes. I'm a big fan of his."

The two have become blue-eyed-soul brothers who even plan to get together this weekend to write songs they can pitch to other artists.

And it's almost certain that Tower players will be jamming onstage Saturday at the Golden Nugget. Tower is in town for its own shows at The Orleans today through Sunday, and its players like to wind down at the Bronson band's late-night Saturday sessions at the Nugget.

The trumpet-playing Bronson had listened to Tower since the early '70s. Seeing them live at the bygone concert club Calamity Jayne's "inspired me to do a homegrown version, at least as a starting point," Bronson says.

That in itself isn't so unusual. "Most of the horn bands I hear sound like us or Earth, Wind & Fire," says Kupka, who pioneered the band's "East Bay sound" in 1968 with saxophonist Emilio Castillio, fusing the Bay area's parallel schools of psychedelia and soul. Kupka estimates the 10-piece band has seen more than 50 players come and go over the years.

What might be more unusual is Kupka's helping another band within the same narrow niche instead of saving the songs for himself.

Tower enjoyed its share of '70s airplay for tunes such as "What is Hip?" and "You're Still a Young Man." But Kupka now says the band's most likely opportunity for mass exposure would be to place a song on a movie soundtrack.

He says it "behooves everybody to let them do it. The more songs (Bronson) does of mine the better I like it." After all, he has written more than 1,000.

"We keep doing CDs because if you stop, you instantly become an oldies band," Kupka says.

Musicianship is something that's become less valued on both the rock and hip-hop side of the fence, not the best news for a band whose trademark is the meticulous blend of its five-piece horn section.

But time also has helped Tower become more prized by its loyal fan base. The group plans to tour this

summer on a co-bill with the like-minded Tom Jones (currently working the MGM Grand).

"They say it's better to be 20 years behind the times than two years," Kupka says.

It was far tougher for the band in the late '70s, when it was still a major-label recording act and faced "enormous pressure to play disco." As the disco era gave way to "Miami Vice," the 1987 "Power" album reflected "big pressure for synthesized sound."

Kupka says he recently saw the Janet Jackson video for "Rhythm Nation" and "it was just ironic. It sounded so dated and (the dancers) were all marching around in their 'March of the Wooden Soldiers' outfits. It sounded way more dated than our stuff."

Kupka and Bronson first met not in Las Vegas, but on the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank, when Bronson's band played a wrap party for "The Drew Carey Show." Carey had discovered Bronson at the Riviera, where he was a fixture for 14 years before moving to the Golden Nugget last year. Kupka's wife works as a stylist in the TV and film industry.

"We're disciples but we have our own slant on everything," Bronson says of his 13-piece band with a six-piece horn section. He likes to cover familiar rock and pop tunes, such as "doing 'Stairway to Heaven' as interpreted by Frank Zappa as interpreted by us."

Fee Waybill of The Tubes even agreed to record a guest vocal for the Bronson band's remake of "White Punks on Dope" for the CD, due in February. Most of the tracks were recorded during live sets at the Nugget, and Bronson credits both the Nugget -- which will buy a number of CDs to use for promotion -- and revolutions in recording software for making the project affordable.

"Everything came into play at the right time," he says.

CAPTION(S):

PREVIEW who: Lon Bronson All-Star Band when: midnight Saturdays, 10 p.m. Mondays where: Golden Nugget showroom, 129 E. Fremont St.

tickets: two-drink minimum (385-7111) PREVIEW what: Tower of Power when: 8 p.m. today through Sunday where: The Orleans Showroom, 4500 W. Tropicana Ave.

tickets: \$44-\$77 (365-7075)