

FEATURES

The Guitarists of Snarky Puppy

MARKING SONIC TERRITORY

BY MICHAEL ROSS

Three dog night (left to right)—
Snarky Puppy guitarists Bob
Lanzetti, Mark Lettieri, and
Chris McQueen.

ASK ANYONE HOW TO HAVE A successful band in this second decade of the new Millennium and the answers would not likely include recording jazz/funk/fusion with a rotating cast of 18 musicians and touring with as many as 13 at a time. Fortunately bassist Mike League didn't ask. He went ahead and created a band of just that description, called Snarky Puppy, through a series of jam sessions at the University of North Texas in 2004.

Snarky Puppy has since carved their niche in the music landscape through masterful musicianship, catchy compositions,

and a dozen years of hard work, garnering two Grammys and a rabid following who voted them Best Jazz Group in *Downbeat's* 2015 Reader's Poll, as well as Best New Artist and Best Electric/Jazz-Rock/Contemporary Group/Artist in *Jazz Times's* 2014 Reader's Poll.

In addition to bass, drums, keys, horns, and percussionists, the band currently employs a trio of world class guitarists: Bob Lanzetti, Mark Lettieri, and Chris McQueen, all three of whom appear on the band's current release, *Family Dinner Volume II* [Ground Up].

"Mike League and I came to the

University of North Texas at the exact same time and played together a bunch right from the beginning," says McQueen. Lanzetti too attended North Texas. "I played with a lot of those guys in different configurations before we even started the band," he says.

When neither Lanzetti nor McQueen were available for a string of early Snarky Puppy gigs, League called Mark Lettieri. "We were doing session work together in Dallas and playing with some other artists," recalls Lettieri.

Playing with other artists is a big part of each guitarist's career: Lettieri

works with Erykah Badu and Kirk Franklin; Lanzetti with Banda Magda and Afrobeat Underground System; and McQueen plays in an offshoot band with League called FORQ, his own pop group Foe Destroyer, and was in the guitar chair for the David Bowie musical *Lazarus*.

As you might imagine, this can cause some of the aforementioned availability issues. "When we get the demo, everyone learns all the parts: the chords, the bass line, and the melody," says Lettieri. This allows the three guitarists to fill in the parts of whoever might be missing, or cover more than one part should they be the sole guitarist. But

how does it work when all three are present?

"It's a matter of listening really well," says McQueen. "In the early days, if there were two or three guitar players onstage, it was a bit of a mess sometimes. Through the course of playing night after night we learned to shut up and listen to each other more. I took a lesson with keyboard player Bernard Wright, who taught me about separating a line into call and response. If there's only one guitar player, I might play the call and the response, and if there are two, I might just play the call or only the response. If there are more of us, I'll play just two notes per measure instead of

eight because I'm letting other people fill in the space." "There might be a section where Mark takes the reins," says Lanzetti. "Another night it might be me or Chris. Everything is fluid all the time."

Though all three guitarists can handle any of the required parts, their styles vary. "My style is a funk-rock-soul thing," says Lettieri, "Bob likes building soundscapes with reverbs and delays. My comping style comes more from the funk thing. His comes from an Afrobeat language at times. Chris has a little stronger straight-ahead jazz background than us, but he's also really funky." McQueen too can get textural. "I'm

the most influenced by Radiohead and electronic music and stuff that might not even sound like a guitar,” he says.

For Snarky Puppy parts that do sound like guitar, the Strat-style reigns supreme. “I usually play my Don Grosh Strat,” says Lettieri. “It’s easier for me to express myself on the Strat because of the way the band works.” McQueen agrees. “I go for my Tokai Strat with Lollar pickups, because that seems to be the sound of the band.” Lanzetti also goes for a Tokai. “I use an ’82 Tokai Strat,” he says. “The previous owner put in Fralin pickups, which I love, and big, fat blues frets. I had a Callaham bridge installed and it’s great.”

Other types of guitars do occasionally make appearances. “I have a beautiful Collings I-35 I bring out on occasion, and a Nash TK-54 Tele,” says Lettieri. “If Mark or Bob are going to be there, I try to use a different sound,” says McQueen. “I might use a Telecaster or a Heritage ES-335 style.”

Baritone guitars often appear on Snarky Puppy songs. “Our band uses Danelectro baritone guitars all the time, and Michael also has an Eastwood,” says Lettieri. “On the tune we did with David Crosby, I was playing the Eastwood tuned to *B*. We’ve got a tune on the record coming out in June, with two baritone guitars tuned to *A*.”

Pedal choices vary among the three guitarists, though J. Rockett products loom large. “I’ve been using Rockett Audio’s Blue Note,” says Lettieri. “I also used their Chicken Soup overdrive pedal for a long time, but when they built the Guthrie Trapp Overdrive, I gravitated towards that, because it sounds a little bigger.” McQueen uses the J. Rockett Archer. “I leave it on all the time, especially for single-coils,” he says. “It really thickens up the sound. I’ll just use my foot to adjust the gain throughout. I’m obsessed with changing sounds on the fly and got tired of bending over for half the show to do it.

I’ve also been using fuzz a good bit. I’ll put the fuzz into the Archer so that it’s not so nasal and in your face, more of a thick, synth-type fuzz.” Lanzetti opts for a Maxon OD808, and Zvex’s Box of Rock and Fuzz Factory pedals to create his grit.

For modulation and ambience Lettieri says he favors TC Electronic, Line 6, and Vertex products. McQueen and Lanzetti get more specific. “I’ve got Moog Minifooger analog delay and chorus,” says McQueen. “I swore off chorus, but theirs is cool because you can set it to almost all effected signal, more like vibrato.”

“I have two Boss DD-6 Delays,” says Lanzetti. “One is in the middle of the chain and one is at the very end. I also have a Digi-Tech Whammy, Empress Tremolo, and an Electro-Harmonix Pog 2. Lately I’ve been using the Pigtronix Infinity Looper a lot and an Electro-Harmonix Freeze pedal. On our latest record I use a lot of Electro-Harmonix Memory Man.”

FEATURES >>> SNARKY PUPPY

At Lanzetti's urging, the Snarky Puppy guitarists have embraced Supro amps. "On tour, we all use Supro rigs," says Lettieri. "They send out Coronados and Royal Reverbs. They're fantastic touring rigs, and great in the studio too." McQueen went so far as to sample—or profile—the Coronado into his Kemper Profiling Amp for use in the *Lazarus* stage show.

One way Snarky Puppy has dealt with modern day music business economics could work for any type of band: Many of their records have been recorded virtually live in the studio, often in front of an audience. But, while this cuts down on recording costs, it is not for the faint of heart.

"When you're in the studio with no

audience, if you mess up you can rewind and punch it in," says Lettieri. "But when you're playing live you better bring it. It's exciting, but can also be nerve wracking because you want to entertain a little bit, at the same time you know you can't fix it so you need to be concentrating really hard."

"The idea is that you have to make every take count," says McQueen. "Normally, the first take is when you get comfortable and then you throw it away. If you mess up the second take it's fine, you do it again. When we're doing these live recordings with Snarky Puppy, you might have to live with that mistake, because it could be the keeper take if everything else is perfect. It really forces you to perform and execute, which can be a little intimidating."

You would think the pressure would make the guitarists play conservatively on parts and solos, to ensure that, if a particular take should be chosen, they can live with their performance, but that is not necessarily the case.

"Sometimes I might play it safe, because if I go for it and don't make it I may have ruined a great take with a guitar solo that sounds like trash because I was trying to excite people," says Lettieri. "It's a balance between being really focused but also letting your hair down enough to where you can feed off the audience and still be a part of the take."

McQueen reacts a little differently. "For us, the goal is to surprise each other and play things that impress each other," he says. "If we play it safe, no one is going to care about our solos. I try to force myself to really push the envelope and find something new to say in every one of them."

Anyone who has ever played guitar in a band with another guitarist understands the issues involved. Loudness wars, conflicting overtones, and cancelled frequencies can make the band and audience wish one player had stayed home. The guitarists of Snarky Puppy have evolved a method of avoiding these pitfalls and guaranteeing a good time is had by all.

"We're friends first, so we're not trying to step on each other's toes," says Lettieri. "We all respect each other and know each guy has a unique sound that needs to be heard, so we make room for each other. That's the only way it would work." ■