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Snarky Puppy members Jay Jennings (left), Mike Maher, Jason Thomas, Michael League, Nate Werth, Shaun Martin, Chris Bullock and Justin Stanton

Snarky Puppy

A FRIENDLY, FUNKY MONSTER

BY JOSEF WOODARD | PHOTO BY JIMMY & DENA KATZ

Snarky Puppy has become a monster—albeit a friendly, funky monster—and all through its own fiercely independent means and devices. This jazz band out of University of North Texas, formed in 2002 and now riding high with world tours and a quickly expanding discography on its own GroundUP label, has become a model of self-reliance. Rare in the jazz world is the DIY success story that results in a truly global reach. After doggedly working just beneath the radar for years, Snarky Puppy has hit it big, with a Grammy award (Best R&B Performance for “Something,” featuring vocalist Lalah Hathaway, from the 2013 album *Family Dinner, Volume One*), strong sales for 2015’s band-plus-orchestra CD *Sylva* (with the Metropole Orkest) and a victory in the Jazz Group category of the 2015 DownBeat Readers Poll. Additionally, *Sylva* is nominated in the category Best Contemporary Instrumental Album for the Grammy Awards that will be presented on Feb. 15.

In a way, the band’s new theme song could be

“Sleeper,” from 2014’s *We Like It Here*, which starts slowly before kicking into a higher, groove-consuming gear. The band boasts a personally tended, organically grown, very enthusiastic fan base, a phenomenon that invites comparisons to Phish and Dave Matthews Band.

Snarky Puppy’s new album, *Family Dinner, Volume Two*, is decidedly homegrown yet wildly ambitious, with a diverse roster of guests that includes vocalists David Crosby, Susana Baca, Becca Stevens and Salif Keita, as well as guitarist Charlie Hunter and saxophonist Jeff Coffin.

The new album also marks the band’s entry into the major-label world, via an interesting partnership. Michael League, the band’s powerhouse yet soft-spoken leader, is quick to explain that Snarky Puppy was not “signed by” a major label, and that the album is issued on the band’s own imprint, GroundUP, but will be distributed by Universal Music Classics. It’s an important distinction—one in keeping with his overall vision and career goals.

“We’re still independent, 100 percent—you don’t give that up easily after 12 years,” League said. “That has given us a lot of leverage over any negotiations that have taken place with majors, because they know walking into the situation that we’re not in a position where we really need them. That’s great, because then you can really talk as peers, and not as suits and plebeians.”

All of these converging energies and spotlights stoke a basic question among critics and fans who have only recently heard about the band: Just who and what is this thing called Snarky Puppy?

For newbies, the best introduction to the band is to attend one of its concerts, where the infectious energy, ambience, groove power and tunefulness come through—especially when the crowd is stocked with avid believers. In September, the band was greeted by a sold-out house—an increasingly common experience for them—at the 1,700-seat UCLA Royce Hall, a few days after they made their first main-stage appearance at the Monterey Jazz Festival. (The band’s previous Monterey shows were in the much smaller Garden Stage.)

Indeed, Snarky Puppy’s steep ascent in the last couple of years can be gauged by venue sizes. In the past, performing in Los Angeles meant a gig at the showcase club The Mint, whereas this year the band played the massive Hollywood Bowl during the Playboy Jazz Festival.

The band duly rocked Royce Hall in a show that was opened by another young band drawing on fusion sounds: Kneebody. Much of the Snarky Puppy material, stretched and altered to suit the moment of this show, was from the band’s last “normal” instrumental album, *We Like It Here*, including the jazz-rocky jabs and intricacies of “What About Me?” and the more balladic and soothing contours of “Kite.”

Stylistically, Snarky Puppy cuts a unique profile. While the term *fusion* seems appropriate—especially regarding the interplay of electric bass, crunchy-toned electric guitar and keyboard heat on retro synths and keyboards and a powerful drum/percussion force in the rhythm section—there are strong elements of a little big band, clearly reflected in the arrangements for horns. Elements of African and Latin music, plus plenty of ’70s funk and soul-jazz, are in the mix as well, and the melodic and even romantically inclined instincts and sometimes mini-epic structures of League’s compositions are reminiscent of the Pat Metheny Group. (Metheny has proudly expressed his admiration for Snarky Puppy.)

While in Los Angeles, League sat down for a long interview over an Iron Duke Stud-Finder beer at Good Microbrew & Grill in the hip neighborhood Silver Lake. Midway through the interview, our server came by, gazed at my recorder and asked who League was connected with. “Snarky Puppy,” she mused, “I’ve heard of that. Is



Snarky Puppy’s Chris Bullock (left), Justin Stanton, Mike Maher, Michael League, Bob Lanzetti and Mark Lettieri perform at the Vogue Theatre in Vancouver, B.C., on Nov. 23.

that a web comedy?” “No,” he said with a smile, “but it could be. We just played at the Hollywood Bowl. Maybe you saw our name advertised.”

As it turns out, the name Snarky Puppy was stolen from his brother when League needed to advertise his new project for a humble college gig in a pizza parlor basement. The unlikely moniker has attained its own cruising altitude as a band name, a reference to a sound—and, yes, a brand. But it resonates with the music to which it is attached, both accessible and muscular, a kindly creature with a potential bite.

Putting the band’s story-so-far in a compact nutshell, founder-bassist-arranger-composer-CEO League said, “I started with my buddies, and we just played local gigs for free. We made a little record in a local studio and booked a tour, which was more like a college road trip. And that begat another tour and another tour and then we made another record. Then, it started snowballing.

“Man, I sent emails to every booking agency and every management company and every record label I could think of. Nobody cared. When you do that for seven years and you start to have some success, you start to realize, ‘We actually don’t need those things.’ That’s when I started to feel like the Catalans or the Quebecois feel: ‘We are independent. That’s who we are.’”

Saxophonist Chris Bullock recalled the many rough and lean years before the recent upturn. “It had been a slow burn for a long time,” he said. “For so many years, we were grinding on the road, playing our music in front of empty rooms—or rooms with the same number of people that there are onstage and finding hippie houses, anywhere we would crash just to save some money, because we weren’t making any playing gigs.” Fast-forward to now, and

this nine-piece-plus band is making ends more than meet and plotting its future moves.

High on the list of League’s influences, in terms of what grew to be the Snarky Puppy jazz-funk sound, were keyboardists Bernard Wright and Don Blackman.

“Really, the school that I think Snarky Puppy comes from, if you want to nail it down—while the Metheny Group is definitely an influence and Weather Report is definitely an influence—we’re more from the school of Don Blackman,” League said. “He played with Miles and loads of people, and had a solo career. But my mentor is a guy named Bernard Wright, who also recorded with Miles. He grew up as one of the Jamaica boys, with Marcus Miller and Lenny White. So Nard was my mentor. Donald Blackman was Nard’s mentor and a guy named Weldon Irvine was Donald Blackman’s mentor.

“It all goes back to this Jamaica, Queens, black thing of really knowing jazz but also really knowing how to groove and how to play r&b. It’s this weird school that is super unknown, but its influence is felt second-hand, in a big way.”

League grew up listening to Led Zeppelin, a band he described as one of his biggest influences, but he was drawn to the groove element of a variety of genres. “I grew up with James Brown and Stevie Wonder and Zeppelin, and groove and pop bands,” he said. “But also, I was in jazz school and loved the jazz thing. So there definitely was an element of wanting to blend those things, but that real black American music—that thing didn’t happen until our third or fourth year. That was a whole new world for me.”

Tapping into the musical languages and structures of pop and r&b has always been a part of League’s m.o. as a composer, and band

conceptualist. “In today’s world,” he says, “with peoples’ attention spans and aesthetics and preferences, you’re already swimming upstream with a band without a vocalist. So we do everything we can to provide motifs and making sure that the grooves are always interesting, that the melodies are always singable and catchy, and that compositionally, there is lots of stimuli—for us, as well as the listener.”

He paused to clarify the point. “I don’t ever follow the listener,” League said. “I feel very strongly in the idea that the artist should lead the listener and not follow. But when I say these things about the music being accessible or catchy, I mean that as much for us as for the audience. We’re guys who, when we get in the van, we don’t turn on a modern jazz album. We listen to Led Zeppelin, CSNY, Smashing Pumpkins and Michael Jackson.”

Diversity of tastes and skill sets comes naturally to the musicians in the band’s stable. Trumpeter/keyboardist Justin Stanton admits that the band is “a multi-headed beast. We have a lot of interests, so we just try to cram it in as best we can. We get bored easily.”

From a more practical, on-the-job perspective, League comments, “We’re all session guys, too, and are sidemen for anyone from Erykah Badu to Kirk Franklin to Justin Timberlake, to jazz guys, like Wayne Krantz.”

In terms of its current personnel list, Snarky Puppy is, by its nature, a malleable and changeable beast, with musicians shifting in and out of a given tour or album project. “Over the course of 2015,” League says by way of an example, “probably 25 guys will have played gigs as Snarky Puppy. But maybe 13 do the records.”

League said that the expandable personnel strategy was “totally born out of necessity. When we were first getting started, I said yes to every gig. That’s one of my things in life: I feel like everything is an opportunity, and I don’t like the possibility of an opportunity lost.

“I would say yes to gigs and then guys couldn’t make it. I’d have to find another guy, who learned the music and played the gig. I figured, ‘Well, shoot, he’s already done all the work and sounds great. So the next time the guitar player can’t do it, I’ll invite him. Or maybe we’ll have both of them, anyway.’ We just kind of accumulate members as we meet guys who fit the ethos and have a great attitude, who are responsible, play great and can groove and interact. They should have that two-minded thing, with jazz interaction but also the sensibility of ‘I like to play a song.’”

Keeping that critical balance of jazz fluidity

and supportive song-consciousness is a key factor in what gives the band its identity—amidst the admitted swirl of confusion over what to call and where to put the band in the musical landscape. “When people call us a fusion band,” League says, “I kind of cringe a little bit, because a lot of what people consider fusion is not something I would like. But when they call us jazz, I feel like that’s a little more accurate, but I still don’t feel like that’s really right.

“I guess we’re more similar to the Jazz Messengers or Mingus or Ellington or the Hot Seven than we are to modern-day jazz guys. In that way, I think we are jazz, because we’re taking the jazz tradition and doing our thing with it, which relates to today.” But he draws the line when

solid week of work at the Sonic Ranch studio outside of El Paso, Texas. By the time *Family Dinner, Volume Two* is released on Feb. 12, another album will ostensibly be “in the can.” That’s the way this band rolls, and keeps rolling.

One of the distinguishing points of the album still in progress is its old-school methodology in the studio. They planned to track 21 songs in a week in Texas, to be whittled down to the finished album, with no guest vocalists or orchestra involved—and also no live audience or film crew on hand, features of the band’s earlier three albums.

Whereas the first *Family Dinner* was recorded in the theater setting of the Jefferson Center in Roanoke, Virginia, the new *Volume Two* went down a different path. Hunkering down at the increasingly popular Esplanade studio in New Orleans, the band rehearsed its various songs and invited its guests over the course of several days, leading up to the tracking before a live audience.

Bullock said that “the whole band arrived about five or six days before all the guest artists showed up. We started rehearsing and learning all the music, figuring out who was going to play what, and how. As the artists started showing up, it was really cool. We had created this schedule that allowed them to have a lot of free time, so they could come and rehearse their tune and then be free to go do what they wanted.

“But what ended up happening, the end result, was that the artists stuck and hung and were vibing and sitting in on everyone else’s rehearsals. So there was this really beautiful energy off everybody together, in the room, creating this thing together. It added to the energy.

“David Crosby was someone who stayed for every moment he could sit in a room and watch people making music. He was there, laughing, acting like a kid, having fun and cracking jokes. It was just a cool energy, because everyone stuck around and wanted to be a part of the process, and witness what everyone else was doing. It created that family vibe—not to be cheesy, but it felt like that by the end of the week when it came time to actually record the music in front of the studio audience.”

League explained that during the sessions, “Every last person was of the same mind. When everyone was together in the room, everybody just changed. It was crazy. There are no green rooms, so nobody had any privacy. At the studio, there is the main studio space and then a kitchen downstairs, which was like the green room. Everyone was together.

“At any given point during the day, you’d

“We’re taking the jazz tradition and doing our thing with it.”

—Michael League

it comes to applying the band’s approach directly to the modern jazz scene, as such, adding, “We improvise all the time, and every night we play each song differently. But all of the improvisation is built around serving the composition.”

Two of the longer-standing core members of the band are Stanton and saxophonist Bullock, both of whom eased into the Snarky slipstream while attending UNT, after intending to head into possible careers as teachers and/or bandleaders in academic settings.

Dazzling keyboardist Cory Henry has been in the fold about five years, and by now has cemented his place in the ranks. This year, he is slated to release two albums of his own on the GroundUp label. Henry, who wears his vintage influences of Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Bernie Worrell and Billy Preston well on Hammond B-3 and his Moog, asserts, “Snarky Puppy is a mixture of so many different things. It can be anything on any given day, because the band plays so much. And within that freedom, in a way, we all still practice restraint. We let the music grow freely.”

The recent spate of upward mobility for the band has been greeted thankfully, but resting on laurels or slowing up the ambitious pace is anything but an option in the organization. Following a dense fall tour of Europe and the Northwest, and a three-day break for Thanksgiving, the band dove into the studio to begin work on its next album, settling in for a

walk downstairs and Crosby would be singing a song on the couch and Olov [Johansson] from Väsen would be playing nyckelharpa and Jacob Collier would be playing melodica. It was crazy. I don't even know how to explain it. It was like camp."

While *Volume One* mostly stuck to an r&b-driven "sophisto-soul" format, the new *Family Dinner* ventures out into the world, to the Peruvian chanteuse Baca, the Swedish folk-rock group Väsen and, with Keita, to Mali (where League traveled to record Keita in his home studio).

Keyboardist Henry felt that the sessions were one of the most creative projects in which he has participated. "It was a world full of people with the concept of no boundaries, mixing textures and creating colors that are vibrant and new," he remembered. "The band stretched as far as we could to make each song as different stylistically as you can, while still making it feel good."

Snarky Puppy, a 21st-century wonder in the extended quarters of the jazz scene, may be—along with groups like Kamasi Washington's West Coast Get Down collective—harbingers of new musical models rising up for the vast talent pool of young musicians facing a fragmented music business.

Stanton pointed out that "the model is so



Snarky Puppy at the 2015 Montreal Jazz Festival

MICHAEL JACKSON

different from bands that were similar to us in the '70s and even the '80s, in the financial state of things in music and how it is supported. I feel like, in a lot of ways, we've had to rely on our own inventiveness, in a way, and just persevere to try to make things work and push things forward on our own.

"Luckily, it has caught on. We don't take any of that for granted. We want to just keep the momentum going as much as we can and keep making music together, because we enjoy doing it. As cliché and cheesy as that sounds, that's why everybody is doing it."

League views the long haul and rapid rise of the band in a late-blooming, positive light. "From the very beginning," he said, "if we had

a stylist and a branding agent and a manager and handlers, all this kind of stuff, advisors, little musical Karl Roves behind the scenes ... I don't think we'd be the band that we are.

"I feel very fortunate that we had this incubation period where no one knew about us and no one cared. We were able to kind of grow like a fungus, in whatever direction that we grew in. Then, by the time anyone found out about us, we know who we are. This is who we are. We know because we have years behind us, being ourselves. We tried all these things and they didn't work, musically. *These things work, musically, and we love these things.*

"So I'm glad now, in retrospect, that no one cared about us."

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