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LIFESTYLE ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT BLUE NOTES

## Guitarist John Tropea and friends keep the jazz-funk flame burning

Robin Lynam

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For about a decade from the early 1970s to the early '80s, an elite coterie of session musicians - who were also gifted improvisers - were kept almost permanently busy in the studios of New York and Los Angeles adding jazzy sophistication to some of the biggest pop hits of the era.

As well as performing for singers who wanted the groove only those players could provide, they made their own instrumental albums. It was the heyday of jazz-funk.

Times have changed, but some of those musicians have kept the flame burning: some of the top New York names can be heard on *Gotcha Rhythm Right Here*, the latest album from guitarist John Tropea.

Tropea and fellow guitarist Eric Gale (who died in 1994) were the east coast counterparts to Lee Ritenour and Larry Carlton in the west. Among those who got a call from Tropea were Steve Gadd on drums, the Blues Brothers Band saxophonist Lou Marini, trumpeters Lew Soloff and Randy Brecker, two of the Brecker Brothers Band's former bassists, Neil Jason and Will Lee, and long-serving Saturday Night Live Band keyboardist Leon Pendarvis.

Soloff, whose many credits included Blood, Sweat & Tears and the Gil Evans Orchestra, died in March this year.

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John Tropea

Younger players who enjoy the sort of esteem that those representatives of the jazz-funk old guard commanded in the '70s also feature, among them - on the bonus track *Boulevard Strut* - drummer Keith Carlock whose credits include Steely Dan and Sting, and who now occupies the Toto drum stool.

"I am very proud of this, my 11th solo project which is a showcase of some of the finest musicians I have been fortunate to record and perform live with over the years," says Tropea.

He has quite a career to look back on. A graduate of the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Tropea's first major gig was with Brazilian keyboardist and bandleader Eumir Deodato. Tropea's guitar work featured prominently on Deodato's Grammy-winning 1973 adaptation of the *Sunrise* theme from Richard Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra* - which was popularised as the theme to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Big-selling albums to which he has contributed range from Janis Ian's *Stars* and Van Morrison's *Veledon Fleece*, to *Alice Cooper Goes to Hell* and Eric Clapton's *Journeymen*. He also contributed to some of John Lennon's last, posthumously released, recordings.

In between those sessions he made more jazz-oriented contributions to albums by Billy Cobham, Hubert Laws, Lou Donaldson, Blue Mitchell, Grady Tate and Art Farmer, among others, as well as contributing bluesy licks to sessions for Bonnie Raitt, Bo Diddley, John Mayall and Dr John.

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He started making solo albums in 1975 starting with *Tropea*, the most recent being 2007's *Take Me Back to the Ol' School*. Since 1997's *A Simple Way to Say I Love You* Tropea has worked closely with Hammond B3 organist and multi-instrumentalist Chris Palmaro, making albums strongly influenced by organ trio soul jazz, and he credits Palmaro as a full partner in the writing, arranging and recording of *Gotcha Rhythm Right Here*.

Palmaro's Hammond is heard on every track, but he also contributes parts on piano and other keyboards, bass, drums and percussion.

*Black Eyed G's* is by Pendarvis, and the easy-swinging *NYC Direct 2014* is composed by Tropea alone; he and Palmaro are credited as co-composers on everything else.

The opening *Gotcha Rhythm Right Here, Part 1* features Tropea and Palmaro in a bluesy fusion mode reminiscent of John Scofield. The other tracks on which a larger band is deployed range from retro '70s style funk to a more modern take on the genre. Tropea's guitar is the dominant instrument throughout, and his growth as a player since the rockier solos for which he was often employed at the outset of his career, is evident. His sound is a little more electronically processed than it used to be, but characteristically clean, and with each note clearly articulated.

Anyone who likes a little funk in their jazz will enjoy this.

### Take Three

Three more albums featuring Tropea's guitar work.

- *Live at Mikell's* (1982, Video Arts Music): Tropea leads an all-star band including Richard Tee, Steve Gadd and Will Lee through a fine and funky 1980 club date with some subsequent overdubbing of additional instruments.
- *Standard Influence* (2003, Video Arts Music): a set of mostly ballads, blues and bossa, allowing Tropea to tip his hat to some of the players and tunes which first inspired him.
- *The Time is Right* (2007, Video Arts Music): with additional guitar work from Steve Cropper and Hugh McCracken, Tropea tackles a mixed bag of tunes including jazz standards and pop songs.

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