

Axes To Grind

Syracuse Guitar League Hits a Nerve

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There aren't many organizations that allow beginners and globe-touring artists to mix, mingle and learn from one another, let alone on a monthly basis. But for 10 years, the [Guitar League](#) has been providing guitarists of all levels exactly that opportunity.

When Jim Horsman first hatched the idea, he didn't know what or who to expect. "I thought it would be gigging guitar players," he recalls. "Turns out, only a couple of those showed up, but people came out of the woodwork who play guitar, and some are very, very good who don't play out. It crosses all demographic strata: young to old, rich to poor."

Horsman came up with the idea during his 50s, when he decided to pick up guitar after being a drummer for his entire life. He could only teach himself so much, however, although he did want to improve. "I was too old to take lessons," he says. "I wasn't going to take anything from books, but I wanted to get better. What were the choices? The way I learned best in the past was to have someone just show you."

Soon he invited Dick Ward and world-renowned guitarist Loren Barrigar to join as leadership for the group. They picked a date and 20 people showed up for the first meeting in April 2005. It's been going strong ever since, with the league notching 130 current dues-paying members.



Annual dues are \$75, although music novices can also pay \$10 per meeting. "You can't get a guitar lesson for anywhere near that cheap," notes Horsman. "It's a great deal." Meetings take place on the first Monday of each month at the Clarion Hotel, 100 Farrell Road.

Since the Guitar League was launched, it has worked just as Horsman intended. "It was conceived like a baseball league," he explains. "Gather for fun, but also to learn something without taking formal lessons." The format mixes all the levels of players in attendance. Everyone gathers in one room as a guest presenter offers an hour-long mix of performance and explanation.

"It's more than just a show," Horsman says. "They talk about what they're doing, talk about their secrets. Half is playing and half is talking about their craft." Then the attendees break into three different groups: rookies, minors and majors. "The rookies are still figuring out strings and basics," Horsman explains. "Minors are above rookies, but not majors. And majors are like Loren and Dick. They really know what they're doing. There's a leader in each group and they play for another hour. In two hours it's all done and it's very participatory."

From 60 to 80 people attend each meeting to listen to the presenters and their varied topics, which could include talks about soloing, songwriting, styles of playing, and how to interact with other band



members. “It’s quite an experience to present to the Guitar League,” Horsman says. “All the luminaries around town — Mark Hoffmann, Todd Hobin — all the really big names have presented here to a really attentive audience. Everyone is totally glued to the presenter. There is no clinking beer glasses: People are listening to what’s being said.”

Horsman relocated to Florida in 2013, yet he’s still involved with the Salt City organization, as he continues to book the monthly acts. He also hopes the Guitar League concept will grow beyond Syracuse, taking root in other cities. “It’s well surpassed my original thoughts for it,” Horsman says. “The original idea was to cheat! I wanted to learn a little faster and easier. Now, it’s well beyond me and some people really look forward to doing it each month. There’s a personal camaraderie. I think other chapters in other cities could really evolve into something.”

Horsman is pleased with where the Guitar League is heading, as it provides players something they can’t easily find elsewhere. “It’s a different feel than a music teacher,” he says. “It’s an actual gigging musician who plays, talks about what they’re doing and people can ask questions. Something as simple as ‘How did you come up with that chord progression?’

“I’ve gained a tremendous amount, partially technical, but as



much about the musical nuance of things. It’s the space between the notes and how to really capture a feeling or really how to connect with an audience. The presenters are so willing to impart personal thoughts and impressions about what they’re doing and how they’re



doing it. I don’t know where else you can get that as an audience member. It’s not so much about the scales, it’s

about the connection.”

Guitar League members also have an online group where they can interact all month long. They can share tips, tell others about upcoming gigs, sell gear and more. For more information, visit guitarleague.com