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From couch players to seasoned pros, Syracuse's Guitar League has created an impressive model for both teaching and learning.

By JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

On a Monday night in Syracuse, New York, guitar cases line the walls of a hotel meeting room. Around 70 players, many cradling their instruments, are listening to a presentation by singer-songwriter Tim Burns, leader of the local Americana band Two Hour Delay. Burns is sharing ideas on how to back up another guitarist, and to demonstrate, he's invited to the stage John Cadley, a veteran of the bluegrass/country scene in upstate New York and beyond (Lou Reid & Carolina once topped the bluegrass charts with Cadley's song "Time").

Setting up to play his song "Evening," Cadley capos his Martin at the fourth fret, where he uses C shapes to play in the key of E. Noting Cadley's position on the neck, Burns explains, "I want to get a little more separation between our guitars, maybe make my guitar sound like a mandolin—a fake mandolin—so I'm going to find something further up the fretboard." Burns capos his Alvarez all the way up at the ninth fret, where he uses G shapes to sound in E, and adds little embellishments over Cadley's rhythm.

"So I heard John's melody that he's singing," Burns tells the audience after the close of the song. "It's real easy to find that melody and then just embellish it a little with hammer-ons, or find some other things to make you look like a lead guitar player."

Welcome to a meeting of the Guitar League, a long-running group that brings together pickers from all around Central New York. On the first Monday of each month, Guitar League brings in a seasoned player to give a workshop/performance—a local musician like Burns or, on occasion, a visiting guitar star like Tommy Emmanuel, Laurence Juber, Stephen Bennett, John Knowles, or Frank Vignola. (Full disclosure: As a resident of the Syracuse area these days, I've been a presenter at Guitar League.) The main presentation is just one part of each meeting; beforehand a member gives a pre-concert demonstration, and afterward come breakout instructional sessions—organized, in keeping with the Guitar League name, by the designations "Rookies," "Minors," and "Majors." Tonight's offerings include a Rookies lesson on

transposing chords, and a Dylan song circle—the sound of "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," played on an armada of guitars, fills the air.

In Syracuse, as in other places, community music events and groups tend to grow and then fade as their leaders and participants move on to other things. But with a steady membership of 120 and attendance of 60 to 80 players at every meeting, Guitar League is going strong after 13 years, and in fact has begun to expand to other cities. Clearly the group has found an approach and format that clicks with a wide spectrum of players.

"It doesn't matter how good you are or how bad you are—it's an opportunity to learn something and hang out with like-minded people," Burns says. "It's like a fraternal organization around music."

UP FROM THE COUCH

The inspiration behind Guitar League came from Jim Horsman, a self-described "recovering drummer" who, in his 50s, had grown tired of the bar-band grind and resolved to learn guitar—as fast as he could. "YouTube and the internet wasn't really doing it," he recalls. "Trying to learn off of books, etc., wasn't really doing it, and I felt kind of too old to take guitar lessons from a 25-year-old. My quickest way is if you can show me some things."

Horsman conceived the Guitar League as a place where guitarists of any level or style could congregate and learn. For help in making it happen, he reached out to guitar teacher/performer Dick Ward and to Loren Barrigar, a homegrown guitar hero who performed at age six at the Grand Ole Opry and nowadays tours internationally in a duo with New Zealand fingerpicker Mark Mazengarb. Horsman, Ward, and Barrigar brainstormed a format and held the first Guitar League meeting in 2005.

At first, they figured their members would be primarily gigging musicians—that's why they scheduled meetings on Monday nights. "What we didn't realize," Horsman says, "is how many very good and passionate players there are who never play out and never intend to, necessarily. These couch players are the lifeblood of Guitar League."

One such player is Mark Sukenig, who is deeply connected to the acoustic music world—he's an old friend of banjo master Tony Trischka and plays a prized 1941 Martin D-28. Sukenig's job as an optometrist limits his time for playing, but he attends Guitar League nearly every month to stay in touch with the instrument. "I come to listen and learn," he says, "and be around people with common interests other than optometry, which is what I'm doing every day."

Patty Van Houten, who runs a small auto repair shop with her husband out in a rural town, also highlights the social benefits of the group. "I live in a kind of isolated area, and I very much miss playing with people," she says. "So I like the camaraderie and the sharing and jamming."

At Guitar League meetings, the sharing goes both ways. Members not only pick up tips but pass along their own knowledge—either informally, one on one, or sometimes by leading instructional sessions themselves. Guitar League member Rick Read, for example, doesn't play out, but he's got plenty of experience on the instrument—he's been playing since 1964 and took years of jazz lessons. "I've done a couple of breakout sessions myself," he says. "I did one last month, teaching how to improvise. I taught the key-of-C scale, first position, and I showed them that you can basically play any note in that scale. I just got everybody confident to let it rip over the C scale."

Over the years, Guitar League has brought quite a few players out of their shells. Ward, who runs the monthly meetings and tracks the membership, sees a clear trend among the guitarists who join the group. "In my experience, many people, when they come to their first meeting, do not bring their guitar with them, because they're afraid someone is going to try to make them play it," he says. "Then they find out how welcoming it is, and it's a whole different story."

The atmosphere of a Guitar League meeting is decidedly low key—much less intimidating to newcomers than a typical jam or song circle or even guitar-shop floor. In fact, says Barrigar, "There's a decent percentage of people that we've lifted out of the fear of even touching the guitar in front of people to getting out there and performing. We've taken them to where they've built their confidence."

Along with the social and educational aspects, the participation of Barrigar—when he's not on tour—is an additional draw at Guitar League meetings. Barrigar is an all-around master of the instrument, from Chet Atkins-style fingerpicking to lead to chord-melody jazz; he and Mazengarb (as the duo Loren and Mark) have toured with Tommy Emmanuel. So Barrigar has serious chops and credentials, but is also genuinely modest and approachable.

"He loves to share his guitar expertise with other people," says Ward, who's known Barrigar since he was in eighth grade. "What we do with Loren is put him in a room and say, 'if you want to play a song with Loren, go in there.' He'll play a song with somebody and offer a suggestion or two."

INFO: GuitarLeague.com



A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

GROWING THE LEAGUE

As it has for so many members, Guitar League definitely kick-started the learning process for Jim Horsman, whose experiences as a midlife beginner sparked the creation of the group. As he got more comfortable on the instrument, he began hitting open mics and eventually gigging occasionally as a one-man band with backup tracks. "I still consider myself a Rookie," he says. "Maybe I've got one toe in the Minors. Yet I'm still at it, and it's still joyful."

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TIM BURNS

Meanwhile, the success and longevity of Syracuse's Guitar League has fueled the idea of spreading to other cities. "We now feel that we're ready to open the doors," Horsman says. "Our dream would be to have chapters throughout the country." That way when members travel, they could go to meetings elsewhere—a little like AA but addressing a healthier addiction.

The expansion has begun. A second chapter is now up and running in southern Wisconsin, and Horsman, who recently relocated to Asheville, North Carolina, is in the process of launching a chapter there. All that's needed for a new Guitar League chapter, he points out, is a venue—a church, town hall, community center, hotel, etc., with a decent-sized meeting space and a couple of side rooms for breakout sessions. There are no startup fees, and memberships, currently priced at \$75 per year, keep the operation going.

In Syracuse, Horsman was amazed to discover so many passionate guitarists who may live next door yet you'd never know they played, and he is convinced the same would be true anywhere.

"I don't know any other program that flushes out guitar players like Guitar League does," he says. "I bet there are so many darn guitar players hidden in every community."

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