

Artists

ANTHONY SCARLATI

Don't Call Him Country

NASHVILLE'S GUTHRIE TRAPP GIVES FUSION SOME ROOTS

BY MICHAEL ROSS

FOUR NIGHTS A WEEK IN NASHVILLE YOU CAN SEE THE DON KELLY BAND HONKY TONKIN' at Robert's Western World on Broadway. The band is the American equivalent of a '60s-era John Mayall's Bluesbreakers (which featured at various times Eric Clapton, Peter Green, and Mick Taylor) in that an apprenticeship has become a rite of passage for the best guitarists in town. That town being Nashville, it means some of the best players *anywhere*—and Guthrie Trapp followed Johnny Hiland's tenure. Gigs with Garth Brooks, Alison Krauss, Dolly Parton, Lyle Lovett, Randy Travis, Vince Gill, Sam Bush, Travis Tritt, George Jones, and dozens of other heavyweights followed.

Trapp developed his prodigious chops while growing up on the border of Florida and Alabama, and by 16 he had won the Alabama guitar and mandolin competitions twice running. But before you pigeonhole Trapp as a country player, you should know his electric schooling came courtesy of his uncle's Johnny Winter records. And, any categorization becomes irrelevant once you hear *Guthrie Trapp* [Guthrie Trapp Records], featuring Nashville bass legend Michael Rhodes and drummer Pete Abbott (known collectively as TAR). On it, Trapp's country, bluegrass, blues, and jazz influences meld together into a high-octane blend spanning odd-time fusion to Latin funk to blues to New Orleans grooves.

How did you get the Don Kelly gig and did that help break you in Nashville?

My band on the Gulf Coast played country, jump blues, swing, jazz, and rockabilly, so when I moved to Nashville I had already been doing that Danny Gatton thing, where you mix all kinds of music into one style. I had heard Johnny Hiland on a Don Kelly record, so the first thing I did when I moved here was try to sit in at Robert's Western World. I hung out and tried for months, but Don would never let me. When he finally did, he said, "Johnny's leaving. If you want to play with the band, come on down."

My chops were smoking when I had that gig. It was four nights a week, four hours a night, no

breaks, burning tempos, and no other instrument to share solos. But when you start doing studio work, or touring, you don't get to solo and play like you do when playing in bars—nobody is going to let you play that much. You develop a different kind of chops that are more about playing for the song—playing around vocals and other instruments—rather than technical chops.

From there, word spread, and I toured with Patty Loveless, and then Jerry Douglas for four years. I also formed the band 18 South, played with Shawn Camp, and I have some sessions coming up with John Oates of Hall and Oates. I can't believe the list of people I have been able to play with, some of whom are my heroes. I used



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to listen to Jerry Douglas when I was a kid. Last week I got a call to play with Rodney Crowell and Emmylou Harris on a session.

In a town full of pickers, what do you think has enabled you to be as successful as you are?

I've heard from people I respect that my playing is very "seat-of-the-pants" and soulful, which is what I live for. I have no idea how to read music, and although I can read a Nashville number chord chart, I only use it as a roadmap and then try to get away from it, because I don't want to sound like I am just reading a chart and not playing my instrument.

Your great tone might also be a factor. Tell us about your Rockett Guthrie Trapp OD signature pedal and your approach to tone in general.

My signature pedal is modeled a bit on the Nobels ODR-1, which a lot of people in this town use, and which I like because it doesn't sound like a pedal. I have two of them

on my board. My signature overdrive pedal has more gain and is excellent for playing single-note lead lines, and for getting David Lindley-like slide sounds. Mark Samson from Matchless helped design it.

For good tone, I think you should turn a nice old Fender tube amp up to five, get a fat and warm clean tone, and then add your pedals. When people ask me what kind of compression I use I say, "Natural—just turn up the amp and hit the strings hard." I have an Xotic Effects RC Booster that I leave on all the time, to just add a little bit of body. When I need some drive I'll add one of the Nobels pedals set for low gain, and when I want higher gain I will add the second Nobels, or hit my signature pedal, which is more compressed sounding.

For Leslie effects I use an old Arion Stereo Chorus, and for tremolo I use a T-Rex Tremster, though every now and then I will use a Swart AST Pro amp to get a tube tremolo sound.

You also have an Electro-Harmonix Deluxe Memory Man, a Boss DD-7 digital delay, and a Strymon Brigadier dBucket Delay on your pedalboard. What functions do they serve?

I bought the Strymon so I would have tap tempo for sessions, but I am hooked on the Memory Man. I use the Boss delay for reverse delay, and, before I got the Strymon, I used it to split the signal to two amps.

What are your go-to guitars and amps?

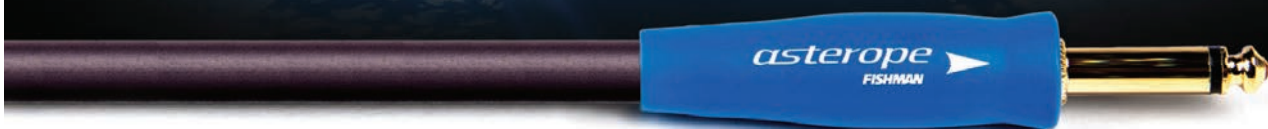
I'm a Fender endorser and I love their guitars. I also play an LSL Les Paul Junior-style guitar. There is a guy named Floyd Casista who built a Tele-style guitar for me. I bonded with that guitar years ago and it's the one I feel most comfortable on. I might bring a bunch of guitars to a session, but in the heat of battle, when I am playing live, it's the one that I go to. That guitar started out with Fender Mexican Tele pickups, then had Lindy Fralins, and then went back to the Mexican Tele pickups.

My go-to amps are two Fenders: a '66

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Deluxe Reverb and a '66 Princeton Reverb with a 12" speaker. I also use Vox amps and a Swart AST Pro on sessions.

You also play a lot of acoustic. Do you modify your right-hand technique when switching from acoustic to electric?

Very little actually changes. If I am doing any single-note picking, whether acoustic or

electric, I am just using my flatpicked bluegrass-style down/up/down picking, where you get a note in each direction. As soon as I get on electric I start incorporating my fingers, but I have to say they sneak in on acoustic as well. You can play full chord voicings plucking everything with the pick and three fingers.

Do you treat the nails of your picking fingers?

I let the nails grow to where they just peek out over the flesh. I use a little bit of flesh and a little bit of nail—the nail mostly reinforces the flesh.

Why did you choose to record most of your record with just guitar, bass, and drums?

The trio thing is fun because there is a lot of space for everybody, and I don't have to be harmonically conscious of what a keyboard player or another guitarist is doing. With our trio, TAR, we can go anywhere. Michael will go with me or I will go with him. It is the true definition of fusion. We are bringing in all our influences, but we are not playing like we are at the Baked Potato [a famous Los Angeles club showcasing fusion players].

The music is not so far out that people can't understand it, because if it was, I couldn't understand it. We do songs in odd time signatures, but if I had to count the time I couldn't play them. I am not thinking about chord extensions and all that stuff. It is a kind of uneducated free music. There will be even more of that on the next record.

With your ability to mix musical genres, how do you decide how far you can stray from the pure style when you are on a session?

A lot of people in Nashville want to keep it safe, because they are trying to get their song cut, or get it on the radio. They say, "Make it funky," or "Make it bluesy," but if I actually go there, they say, "Oh no, not that much, bring it back." They really want it the same as it always was.

I say push the boundaries as far as you can. That's why I don't do a lot of heavy pop sessions. I get calls to do my thing—more rootsy sounding stuff, where I do try to push the boundaries. I will take 12 guitars, four or five amps, and a bunch of pedals—but no matter what I pick up it is going to sound like me. People say I am more of an artist than a chameleon and I am thrilled with that. 🎸

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