

Miss Demeanor and the Groove Felons: Making music this good should be a crime

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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To get to Siesta Ranch Recording Studio, I had to travel down a farm to market road, two county roads and a dirt road. But what I found was so worth the trip.

In addition to being a state-of-the-art facility where country star Kacey Musgraves laid down tracks for a self-titled record, Siesta Ranch serves as the rehearsal hall for Miss Demeanor and the Groove Felons.

The group celebrates its first anniversary this month, but the artists, including vocalist Shannon Monk, guitarist Fred Howard, drummer L. Allen Prazak and bass player Rhandy Simmons, have been involved in music for decades.

Monk grew up in Dallas and has been singing and enjoying music for as long as she can remember.

“I grew up listening to my mom and my aunts singing along with the radio,” Monk said.

She cites the golden era of musicals as an influence, along with songs written for Disney. She also favored The Supremes, Lana Cantrell and Linda Ronstadt.

Monk worked for years as a house manager for professional theaters.

“I spent my money going to see live music,” she explained. “I got to hear great music, including the Dixie Chicks [before Natalie Maines], the New Bohemian, Café Noir and Fever in the Funkhouse.”

After moving to Winnsboro in 1995, Monk and her husband, Michael, hosted house concerts.

“There was no live music out here, so we started having them in our living room,” she stated. “They fed my soul.”

For a while, Monk was a vocalist with True Blue, a group that included local musicians Rick Murray, Ben Scarborough and Kurt Bittner and keyboardist George Gagliardi of Dallas.

Monk met Simmons when she and Michael used his studio to record a song they had written for their two foster children, Jamie and JR Wygal.

Simmons, Prazak and Howard had formed a group and even had a vocalist. When the girl singer didn’t work out, they decided to set up a rehearsal with Monk.

“I was as nervous as I could be,” Monk confessed.

“We have that effect on people,” quipped Prazak, quickly breaking out in a full laugh.

Prazak taught himself to play drums when he was nine. Since then, he has always been in a band. Although he’s played every kind of music, his preferred genre is jazz.

Along with being the group’s time-keeper, Prazak is a walking encyclopedia of music.

Prazak, a honors graduate of San Fransisco State with a degree in fine arts, knows the back story of almost every song in the combo’s deep catalog of songs.

“I’ll take a little credit for some of the songs we do,” he admitted.

For instance, he knew there was a clip Judy Garland singing “Here’s That Rainy Day.”

“I’m such a Judy Garland fan,” confessed the father of two grown girls. “There was a clip on YouTube of her from 1963. She’s just standing there in a raincoat. Behind her are couples with umbrellas doing simple choreography. It’s really haunting.”

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The band does a great cover of “Darn That Dream,” a 1939 Jimmy Van Heusen song that was covered by jazz great Miles Davis on the record “Birth of the Cool.” It was the only cut on the record that used a vocalist.

“Kenny ‘Pancho’ Hagood sang it,” he noted. “It’s not an easy song to do, as Miles Davis told *Metronome Magazine*

– ‘Darn That Dream’ is a bitch to play.”

Prazak retired from the Geneva, Switzerland, office of The United Nations/World Health Organization after 23 years as an archivist.

He worked in the tropical disease research division.

He went to Europe to race bicycles after the “devastating” breakup of his marriage.

“I had been following the sport for many years,” he explained. “I was riding with a local club based in Friendswood. I decided to clear my head by flying to Europe with a boxed, disassembled bike in the hold, and tour as long as my money held out.”

While abroad, Prazak, a Galveston native, continued playing music, sometimes gigging in the most interesting places.

“Once, in the dead of winter, my five-piece group, ‘Jazzmin,’ played in the remodeled former dungeon of a 16th century castle with vaulted stone ceilings and the names of prisoners carved into the walls,” he said. “The sound was, surprisingly, fantastically good.”

Guitarist and retired electrical engineer Howard is the quiet man of the group. Raised in Houston and Richardson, he earned a degree from the University of Texas at Dallas. He’s been married for 28 years to wife, Jan, and has one son, Jason.

Howard played in rock bands during his teens and 20s. He laid out for a while, but has been a regular session musician at the studio since 2006. He played with rock band Slightly Tilted during 2008.

As for musical influences, Howard says, “I hope I’m influenced by every great player I’ve ever heard.”

He picked up the guitar after being inspired by Chet Atkins. He also credits The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton for shaping his style.

He cites classical guitarists Jose Thomas, John Williams, David Russell, Manuel Barueco among his favorites.

“I am not a classical guitarist,” he said. “I accidentally discovered the genre when I was 18. It was like discovering a parallel universe. I took lessons for about a year and a half, but left it to tour with a rock band. I’m thankful every day that I had the experience. It enriches every part of my musical life.”

Howard is especially fond of jazz great Pat Metheny.

“Much of his music is ‘accessible,’ compared to, say, hard bop,” he explained. “Much of his work is joyous; it touches human emotions at a primal, sub-language level.”

Howard says guitar nuts like him are Metheny fans because he’s “an excellent player and has his own distinctive sound and style.”

Currently, the band doesn’t cover any of Metheny’s work, but Howard is hoping to change that.

“I’m working on a couple [of his songs],” he confessed. “I’ll spring ‘em on the group and see if they’ll give ‘em a try.”

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Howard's favorite song is "whichever one I'm playing really well," which right now translates to "Fly Me To The Moon."

Also among his top picks are "A Foggy Day," "East of the Sun" and "Darn That Dream."

As for Simmons, his favorite tune – right now – is Sting's "Message in a Bottle."

"I like that we're stretching out and making it our own," Simmons said. "And I like the 'Take Five/My Favorite Things' because we're taking 3/4 over 5/4 time signature and at the end we go to 6/8 – all in one tune."

He also has a fondness for "A Foggy Day" and "Fly Me to the Moon."

Simmons grew up in Garland and started playing bass for local blues bands. He has toured with Room Full of Blues, Anson Funderburgh and the Rockets, Mike Morgan and the Crawl and the Brubeck Brothers. Later, he joined Belvista, a jazz fusion group, and most recently he played with the roots rock band Slightly Tilted.

He has also shared the stage with legends like Stevie Ray Vaughn, Kim Wilson (of the Fabulous Thunderbirds), Carlos Santana and Travis Tritt.

He took a break and worked as a fishing guide on Lake Fork.

While he was with Mike Morgan and the Crawl, he caught the attention of Travis Tritt's manager, which led to a phone call that could have changed his life.

"Tim Alexander, who played with Ray Benson and Asleep at the Wheel, told me they wanted me to audition for the band," he explained. "I said, 'Nah, man. I got something else going on.'"

Simmons has no regrets. He's happy playing with the group and helping other artists in his studio.

When asked who works the hardest in the group, Simmons was quick to answer.



"Shannon and Fred," he said. "I'll give you that any day. I've been doing it so long, I just come in and sit down. Fred learns the songs note for note."

Shannon weighs in, saying, "And, Fred accommodates my key. Fred does the hard work charting the songs. I handle the bookings and promotion."

"I have the easiest job," quips Prazak. "I don't have to play in any key. I just have to come in and get the tempo right."

Don't let their lighthearted approach fool you for one minute. These people are top shelf professionals who work very hard at their craft. They practiced for seven months before booking their first gig last October – but it wasn't all roses and lollipops.

"Getting all that under our belt really paid off," Howard noted.

During one particularly heated moment in rehearsal, Monk felt she wasn't being heard.

"So I stood up and shouted, 'Listen, I'm one fifth of this band!'"

The guys cracked up and the situation was diffused.

"That might be my favorite moment so far," Howard said, laughing. "My other favorite was getting through our first gig. We just rolled through it, just like old times."

Simmons says they're like family and their relationships are as important as the music they play.

"When we walk into the room from loading it up and breaking it down, and going through rehearsals and arrangements, when we look at each other, we know it's all worth it," he noted.

Monk says she is grateful to the guys for teaching her so much about music.

"All three of these guys are consummate, experienced, generous musicians," she explained.

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“And every time I come and rehearse with them, I’m soaking it up. I’m learning how to act and learning how to pay attention.”

The group plans to hit the studio soon to lay down some of their favorite standards. When asked which ones will make the cut, Howard and Monk have ready answers.

“We add a few tunes,” Howard says.

Monk finishes his sentence, “We drop a few tunes.”

“That’s what brings us the joy of creating,” Monk said. “It’s a constant process.”

Simmons says he hopes when people leave a show, they will say, “We just saw a really good show with really good musicians, and it was worth every bit of the ticket price.”



Miss Demeanor and the Groove Felons will be playing at Liefie’s in downtown Winnsboro on Saturday, Oct. 26, beginning at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$15. Food and beverages not included. Call 903-347-1111 for reservations, which are recommended.

The group will also be performing at Double C Steakhouse in Winnsboro on Friday, Nov. 22. Call 903-342-3111 for ticket information.