

Elmore

SAVING AMERICAN MUSIC

from guest editor **Christine Ohlman** ...



Our TV guide

There are dream gigs.... and I've got one. Sixteen years ago I signed on to do a private gig with G.E. Smith and the Saturday Night Live Band, and that many years later I'm still the guest vocalist in studio 8H of Rockefeller Center. It's a privilege, and a hoot...and did I mention it's a privilege?

If you could look inside your TV and uncover layers of sound, you'd find, buried underneath the commercial breaks, a treasure: some of the world's coolest music, played by some of the baddest cats around.

TV's bands are there for the studio audience—warming them up, pre-show (REALLY a necessity in the Letterman studio, which is kept at a chilly 50 degrees; I've told Paul Shaffer I don't know how he does it, night after night, without a sweater!), keeping them grooving through the commercials, providing incidental music behind skits and spoofs and, for Leno, Letterman, O'Brien and Kimmel, blips and blats during the evening's opening monologue. We labor largely in obscurity, but there's a real art to the gig, and the kick is in the camaraderie.

With just 20 shows a year, time together on SNL is precious. So, when a few years ago they flew us out to Vegas for the unveiling of a line of SNL-themed slot machines, the hang time itself was a treat, as was the chance to play an entire set of complete songs unencumbered by the 60-90-120-second commercial time slots. While I can, let me brag on the names of the amazing (Google any of 'em—they're all stars in their fields) artists I share the stage with: Lenny Pickett, Leon Pendarvis, Katreese Barnes, Shawn Pelton, Valerie Naranjo, Steve Turre, Earl Gardner, James Genus, Ron Blake, Alex Foster, and Lukasz Gottwald throw down without even a 7-second delay—it's live, folks, live.

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The SNL bandstand (a.k.a. "Home Base") is never struck. Gardner is known for keeping the sports page on the stand with him at all times; Pelton keeps a collection of juju totems next to his drum kit; there's a tip jar on Pen's Hammond B-3 filled with fake twenties; and as the season wears on, it'll feel more and more like a little island. Co-musical directors Pickett and Pendarvis keep up an easy banter over our earpieces even as the music churns on. The soloing is brilliant, and, as with all the TV bands, the repertoire is eclectic. We've got a batch of Southern soul gems in my portion of the SNL "book," some of them fabulously obscure. Lenny Pickett is a music historian, as was G.E. Smith before him (we're all well aware of the deep history on that stage), but nobody beats the unstoppable Shaffer, who seemingly knows every tune ever recorded, to the nightly delight of the Letterman audience.

My favorite musical moments: Pavarotti, with a full string section (Christmas '98); Neil Young with Spooner Oldham on keys (Christmas '05); and Paul McCartney's rehearsal, on a long-ago afternoon in 1993, when the late Chris Farley and I waltzed around the studio to "Maybe I'm Amazed."