

A History of Dog at Large

by Gary Watkins

In the beginning...

Throughout the '70s, '80s and into the '90s in Durango, Colorado a vibrant music scene thrived, marked by the success of several clubs, most notably Farquahrt's, primarily a rock n roll club, and the Sundance Saloon, a country music spot. Local bands and area touring acts from Denver and Phoenix were featured, with big names appearing occasionally.

In 1987 I had just gotten out of a band called Tracer. From 1984 until 1987 Tracer had been one of Durango's bands. We played regularly at Farquahrts as well as touring Pagosa, Silverton, Montrose, Breckenridge, Cortez and Farmington. The highlight of the band was being the opening act for "Berlin" at Fort Lewis College. We also found an investor who financed an album recording session.

Unfortunately, we ran out of steam and disbanded amicably.

I knocked around for a few months and sat in with some bands here and there. I sat in with a local band named "Rio Grande Southern" one night at Farquarht's. That's where I met Ray Loose and Steve Mendiaz, the bassist and drummer. We had a great time and they let me know that they were probably breaking up soon and to keep in touch.

In the meantime I was contacted by a guy named Bill Hallock, a country player, who was putting together a band. I joined but soon realized that the bassist and drummer were woefully inadequate for our needs. I told Bill about Ray and Steve. Soon they were in the band and we were calling ourselves "The Gizzard Brothers". As it turned out Hallock had some alcohol and anger issues, and one night at the Billy Goat Saloon in Gem Village, he got all pissed at the rest of the band, grabbed his PA and went home in a rage.

We were all kind of glad after the shock wore off. The remaining three of us had been having a good time, getting a pretty good groove going, and we all wanted to play rock n roll instead of country anyway. We decided to continue on as a trio. We did finish one previously booked gig at the Sundance Saloon and as I remember we used Jenny Winegardener in place of Bill. I don't remember what we called ourselves that night.

Ray and Steve indicated that they were more than willing to follow my lead and let me front the band, which I was interested in doing at the time. I'd had a couple of names in the back of my mind that I'd always wanted to use. Gary and the Gargoyles, and Dog at Large. We actually used the former for one or two gigs before settling on Dog at Large.

And so it began. We started off playing in Bayfield, Cortez and Durango. We liked the trio but were interested in a quartet as well. We hooked up with a guy named Dan Tinker for a couple of gigs. He played really well at one and really bad at another and then had to leave town, so we were down to three again. We got a gig at Farquahrts, the premier rock club in the area, but when we did we needed a

4th member. Enter Don Carlson, the “Doctor”, who had played with the very popular group “Ace Pancakes” in the ‘70s. He was an excellent slide player and sang too. Don played with us sporadically for a couple of years. Farquahrt’s had a second club up at the Purgatory Ski Area, where we also played during ski season. During this time we occasionally hooked up with a keyboardist, Lawrence Nass, who sat in on various gigs and even booked us a couple of gigs.

At this time, Don was going through some personal problems with the gal he was living with and his playing was not meshing with what the rest of us were doing. I had always wanted a band with a keyboard rather than 2 guitars and the feeling was that Don would have to leave. I dreaded having to tell him, because we were friends, but he took it well and we moved on.

About the same time Steve decided to leave the band to go to a trade school down in Texas. I called Jeff Boyden, who had been my drummer in Tracer. He was available and we continued on for about a year or so mostly as a trio but occasionally using Lawrence. We were playing weekends and one nighters and rotating regularly in and out of Farquarhts. Ray and I both had day jobs and really didn’t want to work much more than that. Jeff had an offer to play with a full time country band and took it sometime in 1992. So Ray and I were left without a drummer once again.

If there is such a thing as serendipity then it truly happened to us shortly there after. Not more than just a few days after Jeff left the band I got a call from a guy named DC Duncan. He had just moved up to Pagosa Springs from Santa Fe. Down there he had participated in a recording session with a bass player named Bob Barron. I had played with Bob in the early ‘80s in a country band called CW Shuffle. Bob had also been the first bass player in Tracer but moved to Albuquerque shortly after that band formed. He told DC to look me up if he moved to this area. When DC said he was a drummer I about hit the floor. We arranged a rehearsal out at Ray’s a couple of days later and that when I first met DC. We set up and probably 15 seconds into the first song, both Ray and I realized that we were playing with the best drummer around. He was in the band and we started gigging right away. We played mostly as a trio but occasionally with Lawrence. We really started nailing our grooves after that and with the help of DC’s zany on stage (and off) personality we gained popularity and quickly developed the reputation of being the best local band around.

We weren’t really working enough to suit DC but we played enough and sounded good enough to keep him around (even though he grumbled and threatened to leave on a regular basis). Because he lived in Pagosa Springs, rehearsals didn’t happen that often but we developed a pretty good method of working up songs. I’d work up chords and lyrics at home, play a tape in the car on the way to the gig and we would basically nail it that night. We continued along in that vein for a year or two. Then in late ‘93 or ‘94 DC met Bob Hemenger in Pagosa Springs. Bob is a fine sax player and was looking for some gigs. He started sitting in with us and began doing so regularly. His work schedule kept him from playing all gigs, but he rounded out our quartet quite nicely.

Since DC and Bob were from Pagosa Springs, we started finding more gigs over there. One night sometime in ‘94 we played at the Hogsbreath Saloon. A local DJ over there named Harvey T claimed to play the piano and talked his way into sitting in. At the end of the night we invited him to play with us anytime. Now we had a quintet and we were rockin’. We became a favorite in Ridgeway where we met

Rusty Weaver (Dennis' son) and played quite often up there, eventually in Rusty's club, "The Big Barn."

This was the Dogs in their "Golden Era": 1995 and 1996, even though there was a bass player change in the middle featured the band at its best. We played aggressive, take no prisoners, progressive funky rock n roll with a relentless groove and creative arrangements featuring inventive improvisations. At Farquahrts we were the top band of its circuit (except maybe for one band that featured a cross-dressing singer, but even they couldn't touch us musically).

But even at this point in the band's evolution, there was trouble on several fronts. Ray had some personal demons that got him involved with the law and got him divorced as well. DC suffered the tragedy of losing his son to a long illness and then there followed a short breakup with his wife that was very traumatic for him. In the summer of 1995, the band broke up. I ended up joining a country band named Movin' On and played fairly regularly. But the Dogs kept in touch and in November we began rehearsing again with a new bass player.

A guy named Delaney Marshall had moved into the area and played excellent bass and seemed to have a great energy and a good stage presence as well. We began playing in January 1996. We began in Ridgeway playing for Rusty Weaver at the "Big Barn." During that time we made the acquaintance of John Billings, the man who made the Grammy Awards. He loved the band and on Grammy night in '96 we played a special party for him at the Ridgeway club. Somewhere there's a picture of our band holding a Grammy Award (ah, if only it were true). For a short while that band had a lot of fun. We didn't always play as a quintet. DC, Delaney and I played as a trio several times, most notably at Woody's in Moab, Utah. But as the summer wore on we increasingly became aware that Delaney also suffered from personal demons that were much too complex to describe here. The gist of it was that we all realized that he was not really a trustworthy character. He made a big deal of forming his own band and gave notice in the fall. At that point we released him right away.

For a replacement we took on an old friend of DC's, Mark Mendleski. A good natured old time hippie who played ok bass and sang well, Mark had hung around the fringes of the band for a couple of years and had sat in with us a time or two. But alas the quality of the music dipped a bit. We carried on playing the same band circuit for another year or two. But during that time, changes came fast a furious for us. Harvey unfortunately left the area for personal reasons and we lost his great energy and solid keys. Hemenger left around the same time in a dispute over money. And it kind of looked like the band was disintegrating right before my eyes. But DC and I had developed such a nice groove that we hated to call it quits. We got Don Carlson to rejoin the band... he had been sitting in with us occasionally and seemed in a good place at the time. In June of '98 we played in Denver at my parents 50th anniversary and had a good time but events once again took over. My relationship with Mark was going badly and eventually he quit early in '99.

His replacement came in the form of Bill Boyer, a competent player (he had actually been in Tracer for a short time back in '84). We had some rehearsals and settled into a nice groove but still no match for our sound from a couple years before. It wasn't long before it became apparent that Bill wasn't real happy in the band. I think he wanted to be running his own band and we were in our Dog thing of organized chaos which didn't suit him well.

We had been trying to get a bass player named Jimmie Barnes. He had played with Scott McGill in Texas (Scott is a phenomenal guitarist). Jimmie is a Texas boy, had great stage presence, sang well and played bass better than anyone since Delaney. Once again we rehearsed up a bunch of stuff and the band was sounding pretty darn good with a lot of energy. Then in the summer of '00 Jimmie was asked to rejoin Scott McGill and while we hated to see him go, we understood and wished him well.

So began a period when we used several rotating bass players... the first being John June, a very nice guy and excellent player. One problem...This was the beginning of the era of professional side players in the area... John had dates with several other bands as well and was not always available. This is the curse that has doomed the formation of good bands around here since that time. We used him but couldn't always get him. We had long relied not only on regular club gigs, but also many spur of the moment gigs, and John could not make those so once again we scrambled. We used a fellow named Mark Andersen (he's the leader of Movin' On, the country band I played with during the Dog hiatus). An old friend from Cortez named John McHenry helped us out. Also a fine player...I had played with him in the '70s.

It must have been in '01 or '02 we hooked up with a couple of guys from a local band named the Earthtones that had just broken up. The bass player, Jim Belcher is a great player and a fine fellow. The guitarist was a guy named Joe Schwark, an incredible guitarist, alas once again a character "dogged" by personal demons. He even played bass with us a couple of times. In the meantime, Don had been undergoing some personal problems (a divorce) and basically burned out on the whole scene. We all understood when he resigned shortly after.

So we began another period of playing some pretty hot shit, with Jim and Joe. Unfortunately Joe's problems caught up with him a year later and he was forced to resign for personal reasons. We were back as a trio, but then the same things that happened with John June also happened with Jim. DC and I were both becoming discouraged at the scene. I was burning out myself, the constant line up rotation was a strain and I've got to admit that I wasn't having much fun. DC was finding other work and my day job was demanding enough that I needed a break. We've kept in touch and got together for a couple of gigs in 2004 and 2005. Since then we have been basically defunct.

Fast forward to September of 2007. I booked a private party for an old Dog fan and got DC, Bob and Jim together. I've been playing a duo with Jim occasionally at a low key club in town so we had my newer material down. The gig was such a kick that we want to do it again. We've been in touch with Harvey T and are looking forward to finding some kind of venue to revive us once again. 2008 will be Dog At Large's 21st year. So someone born in our first year can now legally drink! The music scene ain't nearly what it once was, but as our recent gig showed, we can still kick it as good as ever. It's been quite a ride with a bunch of scoundrels, heroes and villains and I've got say that the favorite musical memories in my career are almost all involving the Dogs. Here's hoping we can get it back together occasionally and keep the best of us alive. Dog's Forever!