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SPOTLIGHT | NEW HAVEN

Freedom to Improvise

By PHILLIP LUTZ

The guitarist [Steve Morse](#) has an expansive view of music — one, he acknowledges, that puts him at odds with marketers intent on labeling him. While he seems every bit the rock 'n' roller onstage, his songwriting suggests a more complex sensibility. "It's always been too jazz for rock, too rock for jazz, too weird to be country, way too loud to be classical," he said.

But his expansive approach has not hurt his reputation with the public or his peers. He has won recognition — including five [Grammy](#) nominations and, at one point, a selection as best overall guitarist in [Guitar Player](#) magazine's readers' poll five years running — and the loyalty of his sidemen, the bassist [Dave LaRue](#) and the drummer [Van Romaine](#).

"One of the reasons I love playing with Steve is that we do so many different styles," said Mr. LaRue, who has played with the Steve Morse Band and the Dregs, Mr. Morse's other ensemble, for more than 20 years. "Steve really loves to be able to exploit what I'm able to do. It keeps me happy and working hard."

The Steve Morse Band will be working hard indeed as it proceeds with its tour this month, 16 one-nighters in 16 clubs and theaters along the Eastern Seaboard and in Canada. The tour will include a stop at [Toad's Place](#) in New Haven next Sunday.

Mr. Morse, 55, said the show would draw liberally on high-energy sounds from his extensive discography, with selections ranging from "Ice Cakes" (string-popping country funk from the 1978 album "What If") to "Name Dropping" (an unabashed rocker with a few sly twists from his latest CD, "Out Standing in Their Field"). He will leaven the set, he said, with ballads and low-key contrapuntal interplay. Mr. Morse, who has toured on classical and steel string guitar with the fusion masters John McLaughlin and Al Di Meola and the flamenco virtuoso Paco De Lucia, has more than a modicum of low-decibel material in his songbook.

Despite the grind, the tour will offer something of a respite for Mr. Morse. For 15 years, he has toiled as the lead guitarist for [Deep Purple](#), the venerable British rock band, finding what improvisatory freedom he can within the immutable structures of classic hits like "[Smoke on the Water](#)."

It is only on breaks from Deep Purple that he gets to stretch out with his own band and reconnect in intimate settings with audiences for whom he is among the handful of guitarists with both rock 'n' roll credibility and bona fides in jazz, classical and country music.

"To me, the audience is part of the show," he said. "They're like the fuel supply. You can have a great hot rod, but without the fuel you're not going anywhere." PHILLIP LUTZ

Steve Morse Band, next Sunday at 8:30 p.m. at Toad's Place, 300 York Street, New Haven. Tickets, \$20. Information: (203) 624-8623 or toadsplace.com.

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