



NEAL VITULLO

Top Viper

For the past 30 years, guitarist Neal Vitullo has been recognized as one of New England's finest. Discovered by Atlantic Records founder Ahmet Ertegun, his career took off in the late '80s and he has played venues ranging from the seediest roadhouses to Madison Square Garden. Despite a rash of recent club closings, Vitullo and his band, The Vipers, have stayed busy, playing more than 200 shows over the past year.

Vitullo's ninth album, *One Drunken Kiss*, pays tribute to his influences while sounding fresh and energetic.

Congrats on the new album. What made you decide now is the time to release it?

It's what we do. We've always played our own songs though people don't always *know* they're our songs, which is cool (laughs). I don't want to be stagnant; I want to be relevant and have

forward motion. And this won't be our last album!

Who is in the Vipers these days with you and singer Dave Howard?

Mike LaBelle is playing drums. He's been with me for over 15 years. Steve Bigelow is playing bass, and he writes. Steve was with us from '87 to the mid '90s and has been back for the last eight years.

A lot of the songs, particularly "Slow Down," have a pure rock-and-roll, almost rockabilly feel. Was the whole record recorded live?

All of the songs were recorded live, and on "Slow Down" the only thing that was added was acoustic guitar—my Gibson J-45—for rhythm. As Keith Richards says, "If you wanna make a song fat, add some acoustic instruments."

"Ubangi Stomp" is a rockabilly classic

by Warren Smith; you give it a unique vibe and original-sounding slapback. What were you using for the delay?

My Fender Custom Shop '53 Telecaster going into a Strymon El Capistan through a Victoria 5E3. I've used original tape delays in the past, which taught me how to get that slapback sound, and I use the Strymon to dial-in that sound. It's clean but much quieter than the tape units.

The title track has a cool guitar hook.

Dave called me and said "I've got this song..." and started singing the lyrics, and I could hear a sort of Grady Martin/George Barnes type of thing in my head. I started with that lick, and the song came together in minutes. As far as the title, it's something we've all experienced at one time or another (laughs).

Was the final/tremolo chord the amp or a pedal?

That was neither—that was me doing a volume swell on my guitar. And it's a minor-sixth chord. You can't end a song like that without a minor sixth (laughs).

So, do you and Dave co-write all of the original tunes together?

Yes, we have done that since the beginning, 30-some years ago. A lot of times he just gives me lyrics and I take it from there.

You prefer your guitar straight into a cranked amp rather than use pedal distortion. How does that setup affect your playing style?

It's all about the right hand and digging in for dynamics. If you hear hair on it, that's when I'm digging in. It's also about the right tube choices for the amp, which allow the amp to just bloom when I dig in. There is an overdrive pedal on one song on the new record—a Klon on the solo for "Hostage."

Did you have a go-to setup for the whole album?

I brought in two other amps—a '57 Tremolux and a '68 Princeton—but ended up using my live setup, which is the Victoria and three Telecasters. My go-to guitar was the butterscotch Custom Shop Tele with Don Mare pickups. In addition, I used a Custom Shop blue-sparkle '62 Tele Custom also with Don Mares in it and a Custom Shop white-guard Tele. Though I was a Strat guy forever and still play one live, I've gravitated to the Tele. In fact, this is the only album I've ever done that only features Telecasters.

What's in your music player these days?

Everything is on vinyl; I've been on a big Tiny Grimes and Pee Wee Crayton kick. Last winter, I started digging into the George Barnes catalog. I also go back to the classic rock stuff and anything Roy Buchanan has ever done. Really, *anything* guitar-oriented, all the time (laughs)—and I'm still learning. —Tom Guerra