JOHN TROPEA HAS SPENT much of his life in a studio, playing guitar, helping make hit records for people with names higher than his own. Why? One reason is his father’s gas station. “My dad owned a gas station in New York and he told me he had picked up a car belonging to Tony Mottola (legendary jazz/session player in New York City) to have it serviced and was very impressed Tony had an answering service. That stuck with me. You know how it is when your father is impressed with something! So from that moment on, I wanted to be a studio musician.”

That started Tropea’s journey to becoming one of the Big Apple’s studio regulars throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. It helped him forge many friendships that are strong to this day, and musicians like Will Lee, Steve Gadd, Ronnie Cuber, Dave Mann, Bob James, and many others helped Tropea on his latest CD releases, John Tropea Back to the Q’F, School and the Japan-only release Tropea 10 - The Time is Right.

Tropea’s slick smooth, clean sound started developing when he was just eight years old, when his dad bought him a Stella guitar. But, the process was a bit of struggle for the youngster. “I couldn’t get the hang of it,” he recalled. “It took two years and a friend with an F-hole Silvertone guitar to come over and show me how to play ’Billy Boy’, just the one-finger chords for the C and G7. Then he taught me ’Red River Valley’ and I learned the D7, so I had three chords. From there I was able to get the hang of it and by 12 or 13 I started studying with a teacher in New York and was taking three lessons a week.”

Beyond Mottola, Tropea cites Mundell Lowe and Bill Haley for leaving an impression on him, as well as a guitarist who was making weekly television appearances and influencing a generation of guitarists, “played to walk the ’Telstars’, he said. “I didn’t really care much about Ricky, but James Burton – he was the real deal.” Tropea started gigging in his early teens and was happy doing it, and making decent money, until he ended up going to the Berklee College of Music in Boston. After his study there he went back to New York playing with the greats can happen in odd ways when you’re a studio guitarist. “I played on six James Brown albums and never met him. I played on a couple of Frank Sinatra albums, and never met him.”

While doing his studio work, Tropea played a lot Fender guitars, citing their versatility. But things sometimes change. “On the latest record I play an L-5,” he said. “I have three of them – one’s a Wes L-5; the other is a 64 CES. That’s my sweetheart. And my favorite live guitar is actually a Byrdland with an L-5 neck, which is just a thinner L-5. It has exactly the same dimensions and same wood, it’s just thinner. And you can’t get them to make them anymore. I lucked out when I found it in ’98. It was a year or two old, and it’s just fantastic for live playing.” He also, on occasional live gigs, plays a Sadowsky double-cut solidbody.

Like many guitarists, Tropea has managed to accumulate amplifiers. The more notable vintage boxes include a ’64 Fender Deluxe and several other Fenders, including a completely original ’64 Concert, a ’60 Fender Pro, and a couple “olds and ends.” More recently, he has been using a Fender Supersonic.

One of his recent gigs included filling in for Matt “Guitar” Murphy in the Blues Brothers after Murphy suffered a stroke (he’s recovering), and Tropea would like to gig more with his band. “We play Japan and around here, but I’m trying to book more colleges and the West Coast. It’s so hard right now because people still know me, but promoters don’t always know who I am.” His band consists of, at various times, world-class musicians like Will Lee, Anthony Jackson, Steve Gadd, Lou Marini, Dave Mann, and others, depending on what the players are up to at the time. It’s a pretty simple equation: “We worked on so many records together through the years that I was able to make many great friends and contacts. We’re all very close and have a good time playing together.” – John Heidt