

THE PIED PIPER OF ELS PRATS DE REI

**Michael League's musical movement
to a small town in Spain**

by Judy Cantor-Navas

PHOTOS BY BY DAVID NAVAS



“I do see my career moving upward. But I’m almost 40. I’m not going to move somewhere to make my career. I don’t need to chase the dragon. I think it makes a lot of sense to explore places to go.”

Michael League
Snarky Puppy bandleader

S **NARKY PUPPY’S GROUNDUP** Festival on the north side of Miami Beach is a friendly gathering of barefoot virtuosos partaking in oceanside jams and supercharged drum circles. In 2021, the annual event, known for its freewheeling, welcoming atmosphere, was canceled due to COVID-19. While it was certainly a disappointment for fans of the four-time Grammy award-winning musical collective when they most needed to share in such a communal vibe, it couldn’t have been much of a surprise. What many didn’t realize, though, was that the show actually did go on. Not in Miami, but in a Spanish village of 551 people called Els Prats de Rei about an hour northwest of Barcelona.

The name Els Prats de Rei translates as “The King’s Meadows,” and the town’s medieval stone skyline seems to pop up suddenly amid

rolling fields.

The festival’s lineup included some of the members of Snarky Puppy as well as artists from Portugal, Greece, and Spain. Performances took place in an 18th-century chapel (with awe-inspiring, voice-carrying acoustics) as well as in the little town square on a stage set up under a banner supporting Catalan independence. Snarky Puppy bandleader Michael League could be found all over the place — one night in a corner of the village bar, another night performing with an impromptu big band in the plaza, and another night playing bass beside Jorge Pardo, the flamenco saxophone and flute player known for his time as a member of Paco de Lucía’s band.

“We had music from Galicia and flamenco,” notes League. “A 20-piece Iberian percussion ensemble did a set of modern music.”

Only Prats residents were allowed to attend the festival, which evolved into a showing of mutual support: A crew of volunteers mobilized at the village city hall to oversee concert logistics and cook meals for the musicians. League and the other artists performed for a livestream, but mostly for the villagers.

The festival returned to its original format in Miami this May. But on an early spring morning, League is in Prats greeting visitors in the doorway of his house on an empty, narrow street in the historic center of the town. Wearing felt slippers with his jeans and hoodie, he’s chatting with the mailman in rudimentary Catalan.

“He’s a great guy,” League says of the postal carrier, as he leads the way on wide hardwood stairs up several stories to his studio. Even on this cloudy day, a skylight set in the vaulted ceiling brightens the room,

highlighting an assortment of instruments and amps from around the world that line the centuries-old stone walls. Snarky Puppy’s engineer, Nic Hard, is mixing the band’s new album, recorded live a week before in Dallas.

League calculates he’s recorded about 15 full albums and a smattering of songs for and with different artists, including Becca Stevens, George Lamb, and Fatoumata Diawara, all in this space.

“Every day I’m working on something here when I’m home,” League says. The word *home* lingers, though. “I’ve actually moved here,” he emphasizes. “It’s not like a second home. My gear is here.”

‘This American Guy’

The California-born League, who famously formed Snarky Puppy with other renegade jazz students at the

University of North Texas in 2004, had been living in Brooklyn for almost a decade, settling there as much as a touring musician can.

A phone call ultimately altered his living situation and his lifestyle, setting a course to change Prats de Rei from just another very quiet village in Spain to one that is a destination for an increasing number of international musicians.

“Eight years ago, I had to write a piece of music for an album the Metropole orchestra and Snarky Puppy did called *Sylva*,” League says. “I’m good friends with one of the Metropole’s managers, Friederike Darius, and she recommended that I write the music here and stay here instead of in New York. She thought that it would be a more peaceful place to compose.

“She said, I have a house in this little tiny Catalan village near Barcelona. I’ll give you the key and

just go there and spend a couple of weeks there.”

Darius, the artistic producer of the Amsterdam-based jazz/pop Metropole Orkest, remembers that at the time League was about to lose his lease in Brooklyn. She offered him the house in Prats — “I told him, ‘You can have this address in Europe. It’s 50 minutes from the airport and there’s Wi-Fi and it’s quiet and you can do your thing.’”

League took her up on it. “So that’s where I did the majority of the writing for that album. And I made some friends here during that time.”

Darius helped facilitate that as

well. She texted a few folks in the village and encouraged them to reach out to “this American guy.” As she recalls, “I told them, he loves to be alone because he’s always with a lot of people. But it’s Christmas, and perhaps it would be nice if you knock on his door and just ask if he wants to have a beer in the bar? And that’s what they did.”

The art nouveau facade of Darius’ house stands out from a corner of the Prats’ town square. She discovered rural Catalunya when she took a sabbatical year two decades ago, then bought the house to be sure she’d be coming back. Her three children

grew up spending summers at the swimming pool and playing soccer with their Prats friends, and they still do. Currently, Darius is spearheading a project to renovate the local theater, which has been used for various purposes, including a textile workshop and storage space, over the last three decades.

She’s become such an esteemed member of the community that last year she stood beside the mayor to give the opening address at the town’s Fiesta Mayor street festival.

League is now as familiar as Darius to the locals, who know him as just Michael.

“I just kind of kept visiting because I tour in Europe a lot,” he says. “It was just like a little home away from home for me.

“And then about a year before COVID, a friend of mine in the village mentioned that there were some houses for sale that were going for pretty cheap. And so I checked it out and couldn’t believe the prices. ... I thought, you know what? I spent 11 years in New York. I think changing my life up significantly could be cool. I was pretty impulsive, actually, but it made sense.”

Homes in Prats have recently sold in the 20,000-to-60,000-euro range

(about \$22,000-\$65,000), and they all have names. League’s had already been named for its last owner, a trumpet player; coincidentally, it’s the only one in the village named for a musician.

“The house had been neglected for a very, very long time,” he says. “It kind of looked like a hobbit house. [There were] little tiny doors, everything was closed, and there was no light. There were a lot of things that were structurally unsafe. So all the floors had to be redone. All the ceilings had to be redone. Basically, the plan was to open the whole house, and knock down every wall that could

get knocked down, and make it feel more open and bright and simple.”

Renovations uncovered an ancient window shaped for arrow-shooting and revealed that the top floor had the obvious makings of a studio.

“It’s a room that was already here with a very, very high ceiling that sounds beautiful,” League explains. “So I just thought, ‘Well, it’s a beautiful room. Let’s make it more beautiful and make it do one thing very well, which is basically record one or a small number of people at a time with great microphones and great preamps and a great-sounding



Sofia Ribeiro and Michael League



A street in Els Prats de Rei

room.”

League says the pros of his decision to move to Prats outweighed the cons. The only downside he thought of was the obvious lack of concerts and other nightlife in a place where there are no regular concert venues. But it's had no adverse effect on his work with Snarky Puppy.

“The band has been living in seven or eight different cities for 15 years. We have members in London, Toronto, Portugal, New York, Dallas, California. It's always been like that really. So in that way it wasn't any big change for me to come here.”

Small Town Living

Snarky Puppy's concept as a band — free from constraints of place, with a revolving cast of musicians, and flexible by design — is a model for these times. As League notes, more artists are abandoning urban centers traditionally considered to be music capitals as the cost of living in such places rises. The pandemic's push



Friederike Darius

from the big city, often to people's childhood hometowns, is likely to have lasting repercussions on artistic life.

“I've definitely noticed an exodus from New York among people my age, like people between 30 and 50,” League says. “I think when you're in New York, unless you're very, very, very wealthy, you're always just kind of holding on. You're never really thriving. Inspiration-wise, you are. But in terms of your quality of life, you're always just kind of clinging on. Even the most successful musicians I know in New York feel that way. And so I think with the pandemic, it was

like a lot of people just thought, ‘Man, fuck this.’ ... I left before the pandemic just out of sheer luck. But I think with the pandemic, a lot of people have left.

“I do see my career moving upward,” he adds. “But I'm almost 40. I'm not going to move somewhere to make my career. I don't need to chase the dragon. I think it makes a lot of sense to explore places to go.”

League's decampment to Prats was a personal decision, not a public statement. But it's a bold enough move by an artist already known for his convocational power as a pied piper among his musical peers to

COURTESY OF FRIEDERIKE DARIUS

make others consider making a leap of faith to the middle of nowhere.

While League's own escape from New York may set one example of what a sustainable future for artists could be, he's also found himself at the crux of another rising phenomenon: the revitalization of rural areas by younger people whose parents or grandparents once left for the city.

The 21st century back-to-the-land or back-to-the-small-town movement has become particularly newsworthy in Spain, where an estimated 3,000 villages are just holding on with few inhabitants, or have been deserted all together. Some of these *pueblos abandonados* have been ghost towns for the last 70 years, since rural residents migrated en masse to cities looking for new opportunities after the scarcity that plagued families during and after the Spanish Civil War.

Spain's economic crisis in the 2000s further drained the villages. But recently, a number of public and private initiatives have been

launched to bring people back to the country, with websites documenting available properties and programs offering resettling incentives. One roundup of such locations published by *Forbes'* Spanish edition featured an entire town to be had for 349,000 euros (about \$378,000).

Historically, Prats — whose history dates back to at least Roman times — has benefitted from its desirably central location in Catalunya. Although there is no industry to sustain its economy, the village was considered a cultural hub in the last century, and has maintained its level of civic life over the past decades as a “bedroom community” (where people live, but don't work) for the larger surrounding towns; some residents even commute daily to Barcelona.

It's far from a ghost town, but Prats' population started falling at the turn of the last century. In 1900, it was home to 883 people, but from there the number started to drop. The population is now holding steady at 551, which includes a recent increase

of 12 people.

Two of those are Portuguese singer Sofia Ribeiro and her musical collaborator and partner Juan Andrés Ospina, who is from Colombia. Ribeiro, a native of Porto, blends jazz, fado, pop, and other styles of global music, which can be heard on her latest album, 2021's *Casa*. She had some doubts about leaving New York, where, before COVID, she had been steadily building her career.

But standing on newly poured concrete in what will be the music room in their house in Prats, she seems at peace with their decision. The multistory house has been undergoing a spectacular renovation for more than a year, undertaken by the same local contractor who worked with League. But even with the costs that implies, Ribeiro stresses that buying a house anything like it would have been impossible for her in a major city in the United States or Europe.

Walking around the space, which is finally showing signs of completion,



Engineer Nic Hard mixes new Snarky Puppy tracks in Michael League's home studio in Els Prats de Rei.

Ribeiro talks about her plans to organize vocal workshops and rehearse for her tours here, activities that would bring more artists to Prats.

"It doesn't feel like it's really isolated here," Ribeiro says. "It's isolated from noise and stress. You can hear the birds. But at the same time, there's a lot of support from people in the village," she adds, noting League and his studio in particular.

More artists, particularly those who have seen what relatively little money can buy here and heard Darius' descriptions of her summers in the village, have become curious about Prats.

"There have been other musicians who've come to the house that have started kind of looking or asking me about maybe buying," says League. "I mean, it makes sense... I think the reason why people are coming here is just because of the obvious advantages that you're less than an

hour from an airport, you're less than an hour on the beach, less than an hour from the mountains. You're less than an hour from a major beautiful European city, and you can live relatively cheaply and comfortably. So I think a lot of musicians feel attracted to that."

On League's street and those surrounding it, there are several houses for sale. Others are being renovated. One enterprising neighbor has started listing rooms on Airbnb to accommodate a new influx of visitors, which have increasingly been musicians coming to record at League's studio.

"Being from the US, I definitely have a fear of being a gentrifier," League says. "I understand what happens when people from abroad move in to another place, and I try to be very conscious of that. I was a little worried at first because do they want people from outside moving in?"

According to Prats mayor Cristina

Mas, the answer is a decisive yes. She commends League and his friends for literally "keeping the houses from falling down" in the oldest part of the town.

"I think that's everybody's fear — that the villages will die," acknowledges League. "Now new blood is coming in and not just new blood, but people who are reviving the old houses that otherwise would just be ruins. And we're also participating in the community. We're not just sitting in our houses all day or just hanging out with each other. We involve ourselves in the things that are going on in the village. I think that the majority of people are happy about that."

Ester Gomez, who works closely with the mayor as a volunteer member of the City Hall staff, confirms. "There's been total acceptance on the part of the townspeople," she says. "We Catalans don't tend to get involved in other



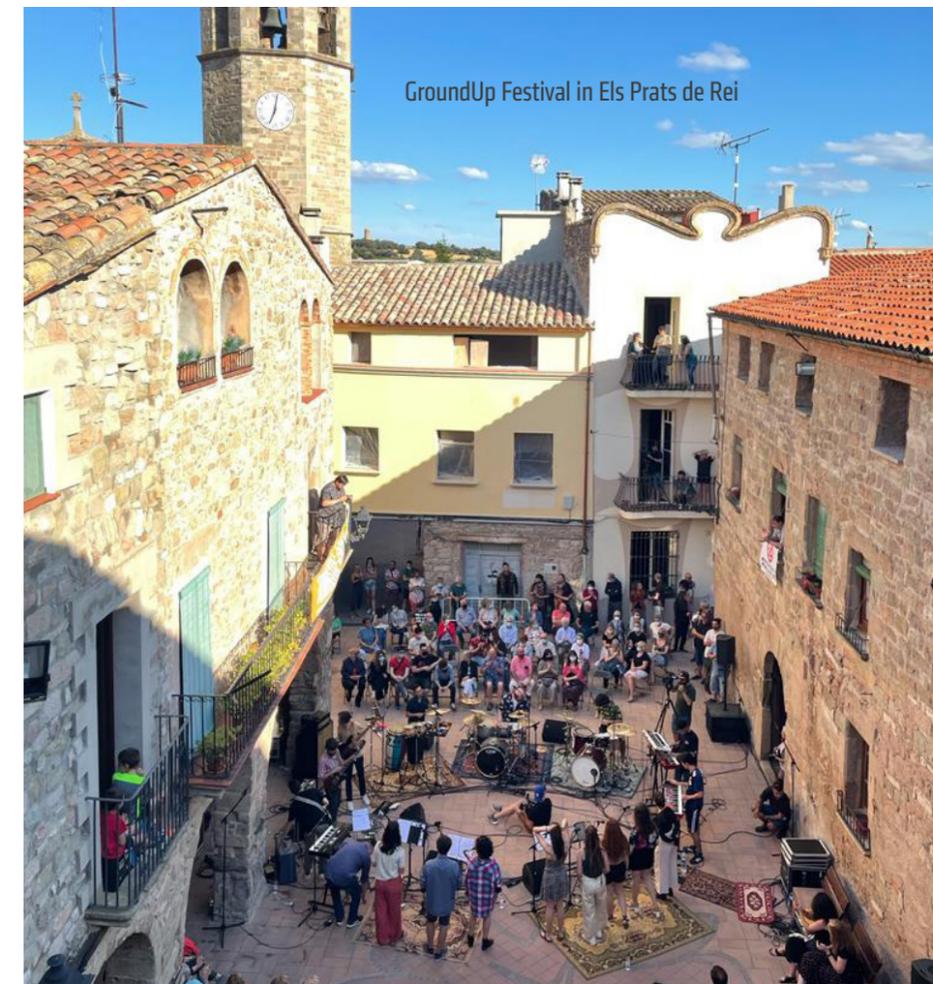
GroundUp Festival in Els Prats de Rei

people's business. But we're happy they chose Prats to make their life and music here. Michael really wants to be just one more guy in town, and he is."

Back in his studio, League swivels around in his chair to a screen where he's been editing some of the new Snarky Puppy tracks. Reminiscing on his decision to move and base his career in this small village, he says, "I've created a space where I can record and compose and invite people from abroad to come and work and live a peaceful existence instead of the kind of hectic, but very fun one that I was living in New York.

"Obviously, it's significantly more affordable to live well, and people are friendly. When you need something, people help you. It's a very chill, very stress-free kind of existence here. At least outside of the confines of your work... I totally knew what I was doing when I came here." ■

COURTESY ELS PRATS DE REI OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



GroundUp Festival in Els Prats de Rei