

# JAZZIZ

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## Traditions: The Old, New Again

By Zan Stewart

There's something beguiling about the sound of an amplified jazz guitar. And young, talented veteran player **Peter Bernstein** produces a warm, ringing, muscular tone which echoes that of such giants as Wes Montgomery, Jim Hall, and Kenny Burrell – three of his main guitar heroes – but is ultimately personal.

Between 1985 –1990, Bernstein studied music at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey; William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey; and The New School for Social research in New York. During that time, he heard “a lot of people going for electronic enhancements (to their sounds). Instead, I wanted to develop an individual touch, like the guys I liked. But I also listened to horn players – everyone from Clifford Brown and Sonny Rollins to Louis Armstrong and Johnny Hodges.

“I liked that vocal quality, and I also liked the quality of breathing,” says the 36-year-old, who has played with such jazz figures as Jimmy Cobb, Lou Donaldson, and Joshua Redman. “At 17, I almost quit guitar to play saxophone. I wanted to breath, play with air. I eventually figured I'd stay with the guitar, try to bring that out more. It's an ongoing thing, trying to get a sound, how to phrase, how a phrase is delivered”

Bernstein couples that sound with keenly chosen notes and supple rhythm. The Manhattan native still lives there with his wife, Erin. He's a regular on the scene, from his steady Tuesday-night gig at the Smoke Jazz Club with Mike LeDonne's Organ Grooves Band, which features Eric Alexander, to occasional spots with his own group, and more. Lately, this band comprises pianist Brad Mehldau and drummer Bill Stewart, both partners since college, as well as bassist Larry Grenadier. They played on Bernstein's latest CD, 2003's *Heart's Content* (Criss Cross), and have performed in NYC at Smoke and the Jazz Standard.

“When you have history, know each other well, have familiarity and trust, then there's a comfort level,” says the guitarist about playing with Mehldau, Grenadier, and Stewart. “When you feel comfortable, then you can be your most creative, take the most chances.”