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The Peter Principle

When Bernstein plays L.A., jazz guitar players and fans take notice

By Fred Shuster

The hollow-body electric guitar Peter Bernstein plays isn't manufactured anymore, which is somehow fitting since they don't make musicians like Bernstein much anymore either.

The jazz guitarist, among the most sought after in the New York area, has a feather-light touch, an encyclopedic knowledge of chords and the ability to play standards like he's inventing them on the spot. He also has a nice line in funky groove-style blues while seeming to prefer a place just outside the harsh glare of the spotlight.

Bernstein has recorded or gigged with such top names as Lou Donaldson, Larry Goldings, Cecil Payne, Lee Konitz, Clifford Jordan, Melvin Rhyne, Joshua Redman and Junior Cook. You can catch him this weekend holding down the guitar chair in the Dr. Lonnie Smith Trio at the Jazz Bakery in Culver City.

Expect some sizzling blues, jazz and r&b from Smith, the soulful Hammond organ hero who's been making solid sounds for more than 40 years. And, as became apparent at last week's Bakery dates with Goldings that also featured Bernstein, the city's army of jazz guitar aficionados will again be out in force to soak up some of the most insightful fretwork around.

"Jazz has always been an underground thing," said the easygoing Bernstein, 37, who started with piano before picking up the guitar at age 12. "It's a language you learn by mimicking. You first have to understand the differences in various players' phrasing, then you go with what feels good to you."

It feels good to audiences, too. Jazz Bakery manager Ruth Price says Bernstein is one of the club's most popular guitarists, with a draw that brings musicians and guitar students from throughout the city.

"Peter's an extremely elegant musician with a gorgeous tone that seems to relax you when you hear it," she said. "It's always an event when Peter comes to town."

Bernstein was initially inspired by Jimi Hendrix and other blues-rock guitarists, leading to B.B. King and Wes Montgomery. He studied music at various colleges, taking lessons from Ted Dunbar, Jim Hall and others.

“I went to see Albert Collins and then started checking out Django Reinhardt and Charlie Christian,” Bernstein recalled. “Then, we started hearing about this new guy on the scene named Pat Metheny. I also got into the old George Benson stuff, then Grant Green and Kenny Burrell.”

One of the best pieces of advice Bernstein got was from his late instructor, Dunbar, who suggested the guitarist “be about music, not just the guitar.”

Bernstein explains the instruction had lasting impact: “I studied horn players, piano players, Thelonious Monk, composers like Stravinsky. I went back to Lester Young and Louis Armstrong. And ‘Bird’ (Charlie Parker) – he’s the fountainhead: the source of the language.

Working in the Goldings trio for more than a dozen years, Bernstein and the organist have a subtle musical telepathy that came across last week.

“I’m always looking for something different to play,” the guitarist said. “You try and be in the moment with the music. With chording, it’s really a game of anticipating, because you want to see where the soloist is going, so you’re always a little bit behind. It’s not about trying to avoid making mistakes. It’s about trying to go for stuff. Accompanying a soloist is like playing shortstop – if the ball’s not hit to you, you still need to be aware of what’s happening on the field.”

Bernstein, who plays a beautifully crafted instrument made by the late San Diego luthier John Zeidler, has also been appearing with Lonnie Smith for some years. They first jammed 15 years ago when Bernstein was working with alto saxophonist Lou Donaldson in New York. At some point, Smith asked Bernstein to work with his own trio, which also includes drummer Billy Drummond during the weekend’s Bakery gigs.

“When Lonnie’s leading the gig, he goes wherever he wants,” Bernstein said. “It’s unlike anything else in terms of spontaneity. There are always some surprises every night with those guys.”