

DATEBOOK



Photos by MARK COSTANTINI/The Chronicle

Guitarist Terrence Brewer is rather clear-eyed about what it takes to succeed in the the world of jazz performance. "I play easily 300 gigs a year," he says.

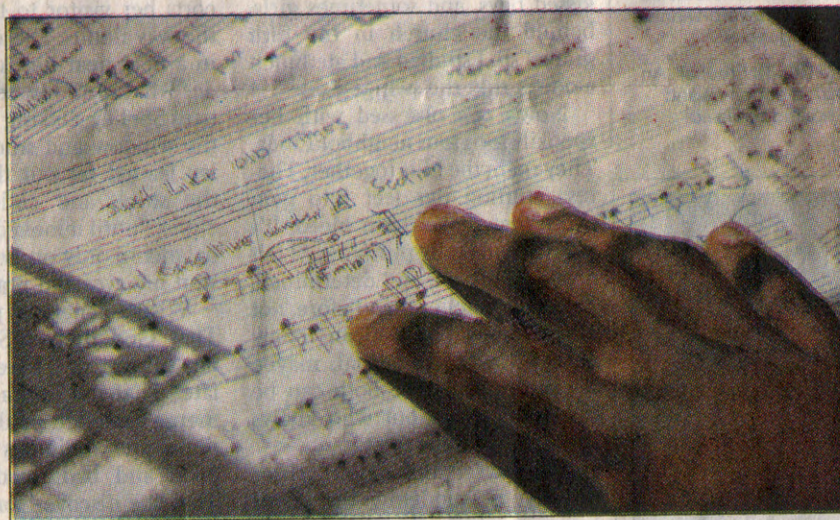
Guitarist Terrence Brewer's melodies inhabit your head. That's his magic.

By David Rubien
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The term "West Coast Jazz" isn't one you hear bandied about very often these days. It was applied in the '50s and '60s to California players like Gerry Mulligan, Chet Baker, Dave Brubeck and his sweet-sounding alto player Paul Desmond — artists who may have been a bit more mellow than their frenetic counterparts in New York like John Coltrane and Charles Mingus.

Listening to some current Bay Area jazz artists — especially the guitarist Terrence Brewer — it's tempting to revive the term. Brewer, 31, has a natural, inviting sound that instantly transports you back to the heyday of classic jazz guitar, when giants like Wes Montgomery were comping in hard bop and Hammond B-3 organ bands. That guitar-based groove is one of the most sheer-fun sounds in jazz.

Brewer's got a couple of CDs out that aren't mellow, exactly — relaxed is more like it. Companionable, the songs unfold easily, almost seductively. And then you find yourself not wanting them to go away. Their secret? Melodies. The ability to write memorable melodies is rare enough in any genre of jazz, but in the straight-ahead jazz Brewer plays, it's what distinguishes the music from all of what preceded it. It's how Brewer keeps the music fresh.



A key element that distinguishes Brewer and his straight-ahead jazz music is his ability to write memorable melodies.

Terrence Brewer: 8 and 10 tonight. Yoshi's, 510 Embarcadero W., Oakland. Tickets: \$6-\$10. Call (510) 238-9200 or visit www.yoshis.com.



To hear songs by Terrence Brewer, go to sfgate.com/eguide.

"A lot of people can listen to these records, guys who play with me, too, and they'll say, 'Oh man, that song's been stuck in my head all day yesterday,'" Brewer says. "And I say, 'Oh man, that's perfect.' That's a sign — when you can get a jazz tune stuck in your head. Not, you know, the latest Black Eyed Peas record or something. It's a big deal."

Brewer, speaking in the living room of the Alameda apartment he shares with his

wife, Cat, is earnest and direct about his goals and accomplishments. For an artist, he's remarkably clear-eyed about what it takes to succeed in the world of jazz performance, and he actually seems to enjoy the hustle. He's been at it for 10 years, playing at any hole-in-the-wall cafe, bar or restaurant that would have him. "I play easily 300 gigs a year, if not more," he says. "Probably 90 percent of those are as a leader."

"I was one of the first guys I knew who had a demo. I would just walk into places and say, 'Hey, take a listen to this. We'd love to play, and hopefully you're willing to pay us a little something, but if not we'll play anyway.' And from that you'd get other things. People would see you and invite you to be in different things, and play in different places."

Tonight, for the first time, it's Yoshi's that's invited Brewer to play. It's a major step up, and not something the guitarist is about to soft-pedal.

"It's a big deal for me, really an honor," he says. "The equation is like if you grew up in New York and were playing Carnegie Hall or the Village Vanguard, or something. I mean I've been going to Yoshi's since I was 15. I've seen hundreds of shows there."

Born in Oklahoma City, Brewer grew up in Pittsburg, a Contra Costa County

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Yoshi's gig brings guitarist full circle; first visit was at 15

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city whose school district managed to fend off the ravages of Proposition 13 and offer students a remarkably rich menu of music options. Brewer started on saxophone in junior high and played in the jazz and concert bands.

In high school, while continuing to study saxophone and clarinet, he got into guitar "via rock 'n' roll. You know, Jimi Hendrix, Lenny Kravitz, Pearl Jam, Guns N' Roses, all that stuff. When I went to college as a music major, that was the first time I heard jazz guitar up close and personal. I just fell in love with it. I thought it was beautiful."

That was Los Medanos Community College in Pittsburg, which also had an impressive music program, led by John Maltester. "They have two complete concert bands, they run like three jazz bands. They get kids from all over the state and, actually, kids from out of state," Brewer says.

At Medanos, he studied classical guitar for several years, and adapted that finger-style technique to jazz guitar. Playing without a pick gives Brewer his signature natural sound, and it places him in the tradition of greats from the past, like Montgomery, and from the present, Charlie Hunter, who grew up in Berkeley but moved to New York some years back.

"We were friends and I actually got a chance to study with him when he was living here in Berkeley," Brewer says. "He's influenced, now, basically a generation of guitar players."

Brewer also studied with, he says, "another fantastic finger-style guitarist, a guy named Duck Baker, when he was living here in Richmond. He still shows up to play at Freight & Salvage every once in a while.

"So I always felt a little more connected with my fingers than I did with the pick." Brewer does use a pick, though, when he plays a Telecaster Sunday mornings in the band at Park Boulevard Presbyterian Church in Oakland. It's not gospel but "contemporary Christian rock," Brewer says. "It's fun music. The religious aspect of it . . . I don't like to go there. I'm just a hired gun. But it's a good time."

That's one of his regular gigs, along with playing duos at Butterfly on San Francisco's Pier 33 on Thursday nights, and in a trio at Oakland's Mezza on Sunday nights.

Upon graduation from Los Medanos, many of Brewer's fellow student musicians moved onto prestigious institutions such as Juilliard or the New England Conservatory. Brewer thought about it, but says "I just started to im-

merse myself in the scene. I started working clubs around here, doing casuals . . . people started paying me to play music."

A couple of years ago, he realized he had to put out a CD. "You know, I'm a composer. I've been writing songs since I was 15. I had almost 100 original compositions that I was playing on gigs, playing at festivals. So I started a record label."

It's called Strong Brew Music, and it's the proud producer of two CDs — released simultaneously — "The Calling: Volume One" and "The Calling: Volume Two."

It wasn't Brewer's intention to record two albums, much less put them out at the same time, but it proved to be audacious. After recording the first disc, an acoustic date with Ben Stolorow on piano, Ravi Abcarian on bass and Micah McClain on drums (that will be the band for Yoshi's tonight, along with Kasey Knudsen on tenor sax), Brewer says, "I noticed I had a bit of surplus money left over. So I was thinking, maybe I'll just go back into the studio and record a few other tunes with a different band, just as a sketch pad to have an idea of what I wanted to do next. And then my buddy Derrek Phillips, who was on tour on drums with Charlie Hunter at the time, he was coming in town with Charlie to do their annual weeklong end-of-the-year thing at Yoshi's. So I thought, maybe I'll have him come into the studio and play on this demo thing. And I was like, maybe I'll turn this into another record. And I still thought at the time that I was gonna put it out later the next year. But the more I looked at it, the more I thought, this might actually work, because conceptually they're two different albums.

"You would have thought it would have backfired. But it's been a really nice reception. It's been getting airplay on KCSM and KPFA. They're different enough that they can live on their own, but they work really well together. It



MARK COSTANTINI / The Chronicle

Terrence Brewer has two records out on his Strong Brew Music label but wouldn't mind a hand on the national distribution end.

was kind of a crazy idea. I just thought, why not?"

"Volume One" is straight-ahead acoustic jazz, and "Volume Two" is Hammond B-3 organ funk, with Wil Blades on keyboard, Phillips on drums and Eric Drake on tenor sax. Right there you have the full spectrum of mainstream guitar jazz.

What you don't have is standards — not a one to be found on either disc, even though Brewer has dozens of standards in his repertoire. This seems to irk some people, according to the guitarist.

"It's funny, a lot of the old-school guys, as soon as they get me on the radio, they're like, 'Well, why did you put out a record with no standards on it? Where's 'Stella by Starlight?'" These guys, they wanna measure you. They wanna hear the 2,000th version of 'Giant Steps,' or whatever, so they can say, 'Stan Getz played it like this or Dizzy Gillespie played it like that.'"

For these folks, Brewer has an

answer. It won't be his next CD, which he envisions as an edgier conglomeration of the styles on the first two, but his fourth.

"That one's gonna be reworked standards," he says. "Because that's a complete art in itself. I have versions of 'All the Things You Are' that are like, weird chords, a different intro, weird chord substitutions. It's like writing a new tune, almost. So that record will be what everyone's been asking for. You'll get your standards!" The next step for Brewer is to get national distribution for his future CDs. "I would love for a record company, whether it's Blue Note, Verve or Nonesuch . . . I'd love for them to say, 'We'd like to help take you to the next level because we love what you do.'"

"But, you know, I'm not really greedy. I just want to be able to play this music."

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