

# OP MEETS PETER BERNSTEIN!!

Colin Sapp

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I was  
focused  
on just  
playing"**



*At 34, New York City based Peter Bernstein has established himself as a consummate sideman as well as a noteworthy leader/recording artist and gifted composer. As a sideman Peter's discography surpasses 30 recordings. He's worked with Joshua Redman, Lou Donaldson, Joe Lavano, Roy Hargrove, Maceo Parker, Jack McDuff and Dr. Lonnie Smith to name a few. To date, Peter has recorded four CD's as a leader, for the Criss Cross label, his most recent being "Earth Tones" (Criss 1151 CD).*

*Peter was originally self taught and later studied with Attila Zoller, Gene Bertoncini and Jim Hall. He majored in jazz studies at Rutgers University with influential coaches Ted Dunbar and Kenny Barron, he also holds a degree from the "The New School" in New York City. Peter is simultaneously a member of the "Jimmy Cobb's Mob", Lou Donaldson Quartet", "Melvin Rhyne Trio", and his own trio featuring Larry Goldings and Bill Stewart.*

*Peter took time from his very busy schedule on April 13th to speak with Colin Sapp about a few aspects of his exciting career.*

Colin: What was the beginning of your career like, I'm referring mainly to when you got out of school?

Peter: My first year at The New School Larry Goldings, Jesse Davis, Leon Parker and I played at Augie's every Thursday night. We used to pass the hat around and maybe make forty bucks, obviously it wasn't really a money gig. Then I started doing a little recording which helped me support myself. I was really lucky to come out of school and basically be a musician, and not have to drive a taxi or work in a restaurant or something. I was just squeaking by month to month, but at least I was focused on just playing music all the time.

Colin: Do you think being in New York afforded you the opportunity to get yourself established on the music scene?

Peter: I guess so. I was born and raised in New York City so this has always been my home. It's the center of the jazz world because it has the most clubs, the most musicians and it's the most extreme city of all, so obviously a lot of musicians gravitate here. I was lucky to have Augie's as a weekly gig, where we got that group together with Larry (Goldings) and Bill Stewart. We were able to get a repertoire organized and also meet musicians on the scene while I was doing the kind of music I was into. That's how I met Lou Donaldson.

Colin: Who were your earliest influences and what made you want to play the guitar?

Peter: I played piano first because I was attracted to ragtime, which is predominantly piano music. A few years later when I was in seventh or eighth grade, I saw some guys in high school playing in a school assembly and I thought, "wow—guitar! That's where it's at." The first

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guitarists I listened to were rock and blues guys. I got into Jimi Hendrix, B.B. King, Freddie King; I love Freddie King. Guys like Albert Collins, just a different approach to the instrument. His phrasing is just incredible with where he puts that stuff rhythmically. There's so much tradition in blues; it's really guitar music. When I hear that kind of feeling in jazz, I relate to it. All those guys talked about the older blues cats, which led me back to checking out guitarists like T-Bone (Walker.) T-Bone and Charlie Christian had a connection, so that led me to jazz. The guitar got me into jazz, just wondering who all these guitar players were. Once I got into jazz, I really got into the horn players and that vocabulary. I like guitar players who play like horn players, like Charlie Christian. Lester Young was his man. But you still hear the beauty of the guitar, that twang.

You can tell he came from Oklahoma, in that part of the country where the blues was really a strong thing. In the earlier jazz, Louis Armstrong played blues, Bird played blues; they really had that feeling.

There's always been a connection. I don't consider myself a blues guitarist, although I love that music. Whenever I get so far into harmony and working out different things to play on chords, I always come back to blues guys, whether it's singers or guitar players. It's really about what you can do with one note. Miles had that. You take one note and find what kind of nuances you can get out of that note; how much expression. That's really what the blues is about. Someone like Jim Hall, who is as lyrical and harmonically advanced as he is, I still hear that kind of blues lyricism in his playing. When you're improvising over a songform, make a little rhyme scheme, balance out your phrases, use simple phrases. Rhythmically, those blues guys are really unique; really subtle. I try to learn from everything. The more music you can absorb, the more things you can draw from. I love blues and I try to incorporate that.

Colin: Standards vs. Originals?

Peter: I love standards. I feel that a lot of guys are playing their own music, but there are so many beautiful tunes out there, they're really worth exploring. They're still relevant today. They have a perfect marriage of melody, harmony and lyrics too. I love playing standards with someone like Brad (Mehldau) who's got such a modern sound.

He's not stuck in one bag or anything. He loves tunes and tries to find different things to play on them. It's also our common language. Different musicians come together and may not know each other's original tunes, but we can always play "Star Eyes" or "Falling in Love With Love." I think the focus today is on playing original music and getting "your thing" together, which is great: musicians who are getting their own bands and their own music happening. But I think the communal spirit of this music we generalize and call jazz is that songbook. That's what ties Jim Hall to anyone else. He comes from tunes and he knows tunes. That's why he plays so lyrically because he knows all those melodies. That's important. A lot of people around New York have a sense that playing tunes is not hip unless you can totally distort them. Then it's really not about that song anymore, it's more about what you're doing to it. You have to be respectful of a song. You have to play it in a way that's your own way, your personal way. That's a challenging thing. You play tunes with guys from the older generation and you hear the tunes differently, because those guys came from the same generation as those songs did. They know those songs inside and out. It's not like playing tunes with someone who only listens to McCoy Tyner. It's a different thing to try and check out old tunes. ●

The new Larry Goldings trio album featuring Peter Bernstein and Bill Stewart will be coming out soon on Palmetto. Check: <http://larrygoldings.com> for details. Peter Bernstein plays at Smoke (106th & Broadway) in New York City every Tuesday night.

***"You have to be respectful of the song"***