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THE NEWSPAPER OF SILICON VALLEY

London pianist finds his heart in San Francisco

STUDIO MUSICIAN LEAVES POP BEHIND TO PURSUE LOVE OF JAZZ

By Andrew Gilbert
for the Mercury News

On paper Terry Disley's life in the '90s as a first-call studio musician in London sounds like an Austin Powers fantasy. One day he was backing Mick Jagger, and the next playing at George Harrison's birthday.

As a key collaborator with Dave Stewart, who gained fame as Annie Lennox's partner in the Eurythmics, Disley spent much of the '90s as a musical secret agent, laying down tracks for a succession of pop stars, from Bryan Ferry and Van Morrison to Brian Wilson and Bon Jovi. But the pianist/keyboardist, who started his career as a highly touted jazz musician, found the lassitude and anonymity of the studio lifestyle dispiriting.

"There were some definite perks, and a lot of people would be very happy sitting by the pool drinking cocktails," says Disley, 52.

E. CARUBIO

Terry Disley brings his Experience to the Little Fox in Redwood City next Sunday.

"But when you do one of those sessions, it is very rare when you play from beginning to end. On pop gigs you don't get to solo and use all the stuff you know. When I listen to those Bon Jovi tracks, I can't hear myself on them at all. Eventually I decided I wanted to do my own thing."

The Terry Disley Experience
When: 7 p.m. next Sunday
Where: Little Fox, 2223 Broadway, Redwood City
Tickets: $15-$17; (650) 369-4119; www.foxdream.com

Looking to shed his rock-star associations and reclaim his jazz mojo, Disley lit out for San Francisco, landing in the Bay Area in 1997. The change of scenery didn't mean he lost his affinity for celebrity, however. From 1999 to 2002, he led a trio at actor Don Johnson's club Ana Mandara during the heyday of the CBS show "Nash Bridges."

Since then, he has built a reputation as a composer with a gift for writing engaging tunes and a bandleader with a knack for hiring the best players. Disley makes his Little Fox debut in Redwood City next Sunday with his seven-piece Terry Disley Experience.

"I spent a lot of time in Los Angeles when I first came to the States, but I didn't like the traffic," Disley says. "When I asked people where they would live if they could, the majority would say San Francisco. I reinvented myself when I moved over. For an Englishman, living in San Francisco is great. You get away from the nasty weather."

Disley's sound has continued to evolve with each new release. His recent album, "West Coast Jazz Impressions," is his most rewarding from a jazz perspective. Instead of the R&B-inflected grooves of his earlier CDs, he employs straight-ahead jazz swing, exploring a variety of buoyant moods and vibrantly shaded harmonies with a superlative cast, including Grammy-winning Turtle Island Quartet violinist Mads Tolling; reed expert Sheldon Brown on saxophones, flute and clarinet; veteran drummer Jason Lewis; and Berkeley-raised trumpeter Erik Jekabson, a rising star on the Bay Area scene.

"It's a substantial band," Disley says. "I like to split up the show and feature different people — start with a trio and then bring musicians on."

The accomplished cast allows Disley to break in new material on the bandstand. That can be a recipe for disaster, but his gift for designing deceptively simple lines that offer juicy material for improvising keeps the best players in his orbit.

"We've always sight-read all the tunes on the gigs, and it all works," Jekabson says. "It's well-designed, well-crafted music and very fun to improvise on. The music he writes really connects with the audience. They can grab hold of it. And Sheldon is ridiculous. It's an education

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listening to him play."

Born and raised in London, Disley displayed prodigious keyboard talent at a young age and, by 13, he was composing for his own electric/acoustic chamber ensemble. Interested in many styles of music, he has written for a wide array of settings, though he has always returned to jazz.

He cites Joe Sample's funky keyboard work with the Jazz Crusaders as a formative influence, though he also soaked up the sounds of McCoy Tyner, Monty Alexander and Cedar Walton while playing opposite them at London's premiere jazz club, Ronnie Scott's.

As a member of the popular British world-jazz combo Acoustic Alchemy in the 1990s, he contributed to their hit GRP albums and toured internationally, sharing stages with acts like the Yellowjackets and Grover Washington.

Though he has joined the revamped Alchemy for several tours in recent years, Disley is mostly concentrating on his own music, performing regularly at intimate spots like San Francisco's Shanghai 1930 (where the band returns June 19) and major venues like Yoshi's-San Francisco (Aug. 4). He's still reinventing himself, to avoid being typecast.

"I really created this band to make a bit of a statement," Disley says. "A while back someone said, 'Oh yeah, Terry Disley is that smooth-jazz guy.' Ouch! That really hurts. A lot of stuff I write naturally fit into that more straight-ahead category. I'm just looking to get my music out there as widely as possible. I don't miss the studio thing at all. I'm one of those people who *has* to play. I'm consumed by it."

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