

By Susan Van Dongen

# Summer Job

Guitarist-teacher B.D. Lenz is celebrating his newest album with a collection of concerts.



B.D. LENZ

Life is getting better all the time for B.D. Lenz, the high school math teacher-by-day, who transforms into a genre-defying guitarist whenever he can get out of the classroom. Mr. Lenz has representation and a booking agency now. He's recently garnered a deal with Godin Guitars to endorse the company's Godin Montreal guitar. And this month he'll see the release of *Straight Up*, his third release for Apria Records.

The Hackettstown resident will celebrate his good fortune with a number of gigs in Central New Jersey, including a CD release party at Triumph Brewing Co. in Princeton June 2. Mr. Lenz also will be at Gusto Grill in East Brunswick June 1, 8 and 22; at Whole Foods Market in West Windsor June 11; performing in the afternoon at the Music in the Square series in Princeton's Palmer Square June 16; and doing an evening show the same day as part of the Halo Music Series, outside of Halo Pub in Princeton. He'll round out the month with a show at the Station Pub at Lambertville Station in Lambertville June 23.

"We haven't played Princeton for a while, but things come in waves," he says. "We did a couple of minor tours in the Midwest and went to Vegas, but we're not really doing too much touring — we'd like to do more. We'd like to get into the festival circuit. I'd play every night if I could."

*Straight Up* is a bit of a departure for Mr. Lenz, who names his major influences as Pat Metheny, Mike Stern and Stevie Ray Vaughan. It's a sea change from his heavily orchestrated, star-studded previous album, *Tomorrow's Too Late* (Apria, 2005). There's a live vibe that *Straight Up* embodies, an uninhibited, loose style that allows the musicians to jam, much like a straight-ahead jazz album. The project was conceived with an organic spirit and the title track sets the pace for the rest of the album. That song, "Straight Up," is a groove-based tune written around the bass line, yet melodic enough for the band to open up and improvise.

"My earlier CDs were definitely big productions, with big bands and complex arrangements," Mr.

on it. It was done in five studios, so things got crazy. I felt that the next time, I wanted to keep things simple, so I totally scaled back. I went in with the idea that I just wanted to create some cool tunes to play live. I scaled down my arrangements and stayed true to the idea I had going in. It's still my stuff, though."

Indeed, the music on the album is still very much "B.D. Lenz," whose original sound is sometimes described as "melodic jazz funk." A prolific writer, Mr. Lenz wrote 10 of the 11 featured songs and continues to fuse jazz and rock with dollops of funk, soul and R&B.

"I work really hard to write good melodic sounds," he says. "I agonize over every tune and am always modifying each song."

As for the lone cover, Mr. Lenz has chosen Pink Floyd's "Us and Them," a bit of moody classic rock from *Dark Side of the Moon*.

"Although we do a lot of covers live, this is the first cover on all my records," he says. "I guess I was in a big Pink Floyd phase. It's a classic that everyone knows, but it lends itself well to a jazzy blend, like my own music. We've done it as an instrumental, and brought in a saxophone player for the solo."

He says the first track on the CD, "Uh Huh," was the first song he wrote for the project and it typifies the attitude of the album, a combination of funk and groove.

"Everybody gets to jam a little bit," Mr. Lenz says. "It's a combination, striking a balance between the arrangement but with a live vibe, something jam-worthy. I'm also very happy with 'I Take Refuge in You.' I wrote part of it on the computer so I was trying to incorporate more of the electronic vibe."

With a relationship that's going into its fifth year, Mr. Lenz is also pleased to work with Apria Records, an eclectic collection of jazz, R&B and Latin artists based in the Midwest and owned by Steve Wilkinson.

"Steve used to run a CD store online," Mr. Lenz says. "I sent him some of my stuff and he liked it a lot. At first he was going to take a couple of his favorite artists and pitch them to other labels but he decided to launch his own. I was one of the first (to sign). It's a small, independent label but it affords me the opportunity to make the music I like to make. They're very supportive, they don't get in the way of the creative process and I can do my own thing — that's rare."

Still teaching young people about math at Lenape Valley Regional High School in Stanhope, Mr. Lenz is happy to have two careers but says, "every year I become more successful with the music. If it was possible, to be honest, I'd love to play music full time."

B.D. Lenz will hold a release party for his new CD *Straight Up* at Triumph Brewing Co., 138 Nassau St., Princeton, June 2, 10 p.m. Admission: \$5. (609) 924-7855. Other performances: Gusto Grill, 1050 Rt. 18 North, East Brunswick, June 1, 8 and 22, 7 p.m. Free. (732) 651-2737; Whole Foods Market, 3495 U.S. Route 1 South, West Windsor, June 11, 3 p.m. Free. (609) 799-2919; Music in the Square Series, Palmer Square, Princeton, June 16, 2 p.m. Free. (609) 921-2853; Halo Music Series, outside the Halo Pub, 9 Hulfish St., June 16, 7 p.m. Free. (609) 921-1710; Lambertville Station, Station Pub,