

# Melting Pot: Jazz, Blues, Funk, and Latin

by Kevin L. Carter

Many musicians are said to be mathematically precise in their work. The music of figures as diverse as Bach, Beethoven and Bela Bartok, French jazz violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, salsa pianist Eddie Palmieri, and experimental musicians LaMonte Young and John Cage has long been dissected and analyzed not only for its sounds, but for the mathematics that underlie those tones and the structures of the sounds.

Further, the "Mozart Effect" is often cited by advocates of music and arts education in schools, who say that children who are exposed to music classes early in their lives are destined to do better in math and science.

For B.D. Lenz, a guitarist and high school math teacher, the connections between his art and his work are strong and obvious. "I certainly believe it is true that there is a definite mathematical logic in music," he says. Unlike musicians Ponty and Palmieri, among others, Lenz says he does not write his compositions directly using mathematical formulas, but admits that "great songs have a definite logic to them."

When you listen to the best-sounding and most complicated jazz tunes, Lenz says, the mathematical properties of those tunes, at least to the trained ear, do come to the forefront.

Lenz unveils his fifth CD, "Straight Up," with a preview party on Saturday, June 2, at Triumph Brewing Company, 138 Nassau Street with two sets at 10 and 11:30 p.m.

For Lenz, "Straight Up" represents somewhat of a departure

from previous discs. Some of his earlier work, says Lenz, had lots of musicians and led to a feeling of overproduction. "Although I am proud of (the earlier work), it was a huge undertaking," he says. "There were as many as 13 to 14 musicians, and done at as many as five studios. Just too much for me in terms of the logistics."

This time, Lenz recorded principally with his longtime sidemen — bassist James Rosocha and drummer Tom Cottone. He has played with the same rhythm section largely for more than five years now. "We've been on the road and gigging constantly," he says. "I think

## The new record of Lenz's original tunes sounds full and crackles with exuberance but still represents a scaled-back aesthetic.

our overall level of professionalism has gotten a lot higher. You can't help but mature after playing hundreds and hundreds of gigs."

The new record of Lenz's original tunes sounds full and crackles with exuberance but still represents a scaled-back aesthetic. Why call it "Straight Up"? "We did it simple, just went in with a quartet and busted out some tunes live in the studio," says Lenz. "It's more of a live feeling but it still represents my style."

**Marrying Math and Music: By day a math teacher in Stanhope, B.D. Lenz unveils his fifth CD, 'Straight Up,' at Triumph Princeton on Saturday, June 2.**

Lenz — his initials stand for Bernard Davidson — has an interesting life. By day he is a math teacher at Lenape Valley High School in Stanhope, and by night he is a jazz guitarist, whose music reveals heavy influences of Pat Metheny, Mike Stern, and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Lenz grew up in Parsippany, the son of a state social work administrator and a technical writer.

As a kid he was a saxophone player in school bands but he was a huge fan of rock guitar, and that's what he played when he was at home. "All of my earlier influences were rock — Led Zeppelin, Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan," he says.

His parents weren't too happy with his choice to be a musician, but they've made peace with it now that Lenz has enjoyed some success. "My dad jokes now that I got my musical talent from him," Lenz says. "He likes to come to gigs now, just hang out. Of course, it wasn't like that in the beginning."

After Lenz graduated from high school in 1991, he took a year to attend the Musician's Institute in Los Angeles, which Lenz describes as a "trade school for musicians." There, Lenz says, "I got turned around." He was in an atmosphere where every one of his classmates spent most of their waking hours writing music, playing music, studying music, or thinking about the above. It was in Los Angeles that Lenz got turned on to musicians like Pat Metheny, Pat Marti-

no, and Mike Stern. "It was a really intense year, the way everyone got everything thrown at them. The pressure was overwhelming."

Lenz says he enjoyed California but personally and musically L.A. wasn't for him. He was more than happy to return to being a "New York/New Jersey kind of person," he says. He enrolled in the College of New Jersey and received a bachelor's degree in education in 1999.

But he never stopped playing the guitar. Lenz says he has gigged in every conceivable setting, including weddings, corporate events, private parties, small clubs, large clubs, casinos, bookstores, and concert halls. His style — contemporary jazz, or fusion — is a bit hard to classify, Lenz says, which is why he has had problems getting on the radio, for example.

"What we do is not straight-ahead, and it's not smooth jazz," he says. "I'd call it a big melting pot. We're in between genres — jazz, funk, blues, Latin — there's so much in there. It's a great thing but not so great in terms of marketing." One relatively new wave of improvised music Lenz is hoping to jump on is the "jam band" phenomenon. "That's a scene that's been growing over recent years, and we can fit in to that."



Married with two children, Lenz, 37, lives in Hackensack. You would think that a man who plays music as a passion and teaches for a living might have considered combining the two and teaching music. Lenz says he considered it, but that being a music teacher wasn't for him. "Honestly, I love music too much to teach it," he said. "Teaching takes so much of the fun out of it."

**B.D. Lenz, Saturday, June 2, 10 p.m. to 12:30 a.m., Triumph Brewing Company, 138 Nassau Street. CD release party for "Straight Up." Lenz will perform at 10 and 11:30 p.m. with James Rosocha on electric bass and Tom Cottone on drums. \$5. 609-924-7855.**