

# Famed jazz guitarist to perform, teach, inspire at MSU

Ken Glickman, For the Lansing State Journal 9:43 a.m. EST March 6, 2015



(Photo: Courtesy photo)

Jazz guitarist Peter Bernstein will be in East Lansing this week to give the students of the Michigan State University Jazz program a boost.

Yes, studying with MSU jazz pros like Rodney Whitaker, Etienne Charles, Diego Rivera and others is a great learning experience, but Bernstein says the secret to being a great jazz player is studying with as many jazz greats as you can.

"I learned from many players. I've been a working musician for 20 years, but along the way I've studied with some of the greats, like Jim Hall, and have listened to everyone – Monk, Ellington, Wayne Shorter, Wes Montgomery. It's important to have different people with different ideas to study with."

Bernstein's appearance is made possible by a \$1 million endowment donated by the MSU Federal Credit Union. Rodney Whitaker, director of MSU Jazz studies, says. "Peter is our last visiting artist this year, and this is second year of the endowment. We have about 3-4 visiting artists each year.

"The great thing about having these artists on campus is not only do they teach the students, rehearse their music with the bands and give concerts at MSU; they also go on tour with our jazz band to schools in towns throughout Michigan."

For this residency, Bernstein will be appearing in Royal Oak, Spring Lake and Holland.

Bernstein grew up on the upper west side of New York. His father was a writer for CBS news, including 60 Minutes, and his mother was an artist, but neither of them were musicians.

He began on the musical journey by taking piano lessons, where he learned to love ragtime. When he picked up the guitar, he found his calling. He began playing rock and roll and the blues, but then began listening to great guitarists like Wes Montgomery and Django Reinhardt.

Bernstein says, "These guys were playing other notes – notes that I didn't know where they got them from. Also they had a great spontaneity. I wanted to develop those ideas."

And so he studied. He went to the local Guitar Center in New York and found other teachers to study with. Bernstein is a great believer that improvisation can be taught. "You can't really teach it, maybe, but you can guide people to improvise.

"When I first listened to jazz I had no idea what was going on. Jazz is a language. It's a form. Certain harmonic events take place, and you have to learn from other players about those things."

Bernstein also says to not be afraid of copying the great musicians. "It's OK; you'll never sound like Wes Montgomery. You'll have to cultivate your own voice. Everyone speaks the language a different way."

The internationally known guitarist is excited about working with the MSU students. "I've known Rodney (Whitaker) for a long time and respect him. I want the kids here to know what I'm thinking about when I play.

"It's my responsibility as a professional to tell students how I do what I do. I'm going to also be stressing the basics and discussing my approach to melody, harmony and dynamics and talking about what improvisation means.

Whitaker says, "Having these visiting artists here serves three purposes: It elevates the musicianship of our kids, it helps our teachers, and it helps the music programs of the schools we visit."

The week will be filled with master classes, rehearsals and traveling to other schools, but the public will have one opportunity to see Peter Bernstein with the MSU Jazz orchestra.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Jazz guitarist Peter Bernstein performing with MSU Jazz Orchestra I, II, III