

The Santa Fe New Mexican, Santa Fe, NM, Paul Weideman, 5/20/05

Every aspiring jazz musician should be prepared for a life of practice and performance, communicating with other musicians on stage, taking risks with improvisations, and living out of a suitcase.

Making a living in jazz means traveling, and a lot of playing. Jazz guitarist Joshua Breakstone, contacted in early May, had just returned from Japan. In 30 days there, he had played 31 gigs and did some recording work.

The New York musician has been touring Japan for almost 20 years. "On the trip before this one I met a producer who likes organists," he said. "So this time I played in some organ trios and organ quartets as well as doing my own gigs."

Breakstone was soon to hit the road again, headed for New Mexico to play as a guest with John Trentacosta's band Straight Up.

"I've been playing with Joshua four or five years now, and I really like it a lot," drummer Trentacosta said. "He has his own approach to playing, his own sound, his own concept of time, his own unique concept of the music. A lot of us can play like somebody else, but the true mark of an artist is when they have their own identity."

"Most guitar players sound like Pat Martino or Jim Hall or Joe Pass, but Josh is not identifiable that way. And he immerses himself in piano players like Bud Powell and Elmo Hope, not guitar players! That's one of the things I really dig about him. I love all those guys -- I even played with Joe Pass once, and it was an incredible experience -- but again it's not the original, and Josh has his own thing going."

Breakstone's newest CD, *Memoire* (The French Sessions, Vol. 2), was released last August. That and *A Jamais* (2003) were recorded in France. Both are trio albums, with bassist Louis Petrucciani on both and drummers Joel Allouche on *A Jamais* and Christian Ton Ton Salut on *Memoire*.

"I did a record a few years ago called *Japanese Songs*, the only album I put out myself," Breakstone said. "I did *Memoire* for Capri Records, but I thought in a way this could be called 'French Songs.' It has a few of my originals, but there are also a lot of really very well-known French songs such as 'C'est Si Bon,' which Louis Armstrong had a big hit with, and 'Autumn Leaves' [composed by Jacques Prevert and Joseph Kosma], and a Michel Legrand song that's called 'Chanson de Delphine' in French and 'You Must Believe in Spring' in English."

On one of the album's Breakstone compositions, a brooding piece called "Frere Louis," Petrucciani displays some acrobatic arco- playing. Overall, though, the recording displays the guitarist's pacific plucking. Breakstone has one of the softest-sounding guitars in jazz -- he produces a round, pretty sound, like blueberries popping into water, and he demonstrates a predilection for balmy, romantic atmospheres.

This is jazz, however, and the reward for a close listen is dynamic music firmly in the bop tradition. Nor is he an adamantly gentle player. "Josh can burn with the best of them, no question about it," Trentacosta said.

Breakstone, born in 1955 in New Jersey, grew up in a family with a love for Broadway and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and, via Joshua's older sisters, rock 'n' roll and jazz. One of his sisters worked for the Fillmore East, and that afforded him the opportunity to witness the dynamite acts of the day, including his old favorites Jimi Hendrix and Frank Zappa.

"I picked up the guitar around the time I was 14 and began playing with an interesting high school group," Breakstone writes in a biography at his Web site. "I was exposed to jazz regularly as a kid, but it never caught my ear until I heard [trumpeter] Lee Morgan. ... The fire Lee Morgan played with grabbed me immediately, and the way both he and Clifford Brown fully articulated each note has been an ideal toward which I work with regard to the sound I try and get on the guitar."

Breakstone went on to study in Manhattan with Sal Salvador, then earned a degree in jazz studies at New College of the University of South Florida; during his college days Breakstone also studied at Berklee College of Music.

He made his recording debut in 1979 with *The Book of the Heart*, playing alongside saxophonist Glen Hall, pianist Joanne Brackeen, bassist Cecil McBee, and drummer Billy Hart. During the late 1980s and early 1990s Breakstone led his own recording projects with pianists Kenny Barron and Tommy Flanagan and baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams. His recordings during the past decade include tributes to bop pioneers Thelonious Monk, Wes Montgomery, and Bud Powell.

Ever since his early epiphanies in connection with the music of trumpet players Morgan, Brown, and Charlie Parker, Breakstone has had a strong affinity for the voices of saxophones, trumpets, clarinets, flugelhorns, and trombones. There have been times when he wished he had learned to play a horn rather than guitar, but his prowess on the guitar shows through his legato tones. His allegiance to the jazz tradition, too, is marked by a dedication to improvisation.

"That's really the be-all and end-all of this music," he said in a 2000 interview with *Pasatiempo*. "It's the ultimate challenge in jazz, to be able to improvise over any kind of harmonic terrain and invent new melodies. The demands of improvising are unparalleled in other kinds of music. To me the playing of the melody and the expression of a song are paramount, but when you get into the improv, hopefully you can say something unique and in your own way. That's what I try to do."

Breakstone, like most professional guitarists, likes collecting instruments. He has "a bunch of guitars" at home, he said, but his main squeeze for a few years has been his Gibson L-5, and this is what he will play in northern New Mexico this month.

He teams up with local talent: Trentacosta, pianist Bob Fox, and bassist David Parlato. This is something he often does, in contrast to traveling with a band.

"That's kind of how it used to be for years and years in jazz, guys like Sonny Stitt or Gene Ammons going across the country and playing. Very few traveled with groups. They would play with rhythm sections provided by the clubs where they were playing, so you just had to deal with what you had. These guys in New Mexico and I know each other pretty well."

Breakstone plays three concerts on this trip in May, and then he will be back for a concert June 18 with the New Mexico Jazz Workshop. It's a life of making music on the road.

"Yeah. New York is a great city for jazz, of course -- the jazz center of the world -- but I still don't understand how people manage to survive just playing in New York," he said. "The way you survive is to go where the work is, which means you travel."

Breakstone plays with Trentacosta and pianist Bob Fox on Wednesday, May 25, in Taos and May 28-29 in Farmington. The Thursday, May 26, Albuquerque gig will be a quartet with bassist David Parlato.

Details:

*Straight Up with Joshua Breakstone

*7 p.m. Wednesday, May 25, at Taos Inn, 125 Paseo del Pueblo Norte, Taos, 505-758-2233

*7:30 p.m. Thursday, May 26, at Outpost Performance Space, 210 Yale Blvd. S.E., Albuquerque, \$15; 505-268-0044

*5:30 p.m. Saturday, May 28 & noon Sunday, May 29, Farmington Riverfest; 800-448-1240 or 505-326-7602