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A Friendly Jazz Sideman?

How John Scofield stole the greatest rhythm guitarist in the world right out from under us.

BY MICHAEL GOWAN
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John Scofield needed someone who could keep an ungodly groove on a guitar, and do it quietly. A modern jazz guitar master with a Miles Davis stint on his résumé, Scofield was exploring the funk-based realm of acid jazz -- a genre that demands a tight rhythm. He'd just begun to earn a following among jam-band enthusiasts with his spacey, stretched-out groove compositions, and he needed a rhythm guitarist hot enough to handle it but cool enough not to overdo it.

He scoured New York looking for his man, but without much luck. So in early 2000, Scofield asked former Berkeley resident and fellow jazz guitarist Charlie Hunter for a recommendation.

Hunter directed him to Avi Bortnick, a Bay Area guitarist working in architectural acoustics. "Charlie Hunter said, 'This guy is the best rhythm guitar player in the world,'" Scofield recalls.

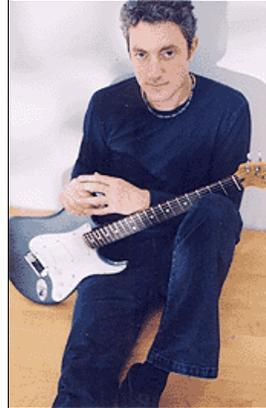
That's quite an endorsement, and, as Scofield discovered after hauling Bortnick in for a tryout, possibly an accurate one.

Bortnick himself didn't think so. "I thought I was going to get my musical butt smoked," he says. "And I'd fly back to the Bay Area with my tail between my legs, a little humiliated, but glad to get a trip to New York, and glad to have met John Scofield."

Wrong. Bortnick returns to the Bay Area this week when the John Scofield Band invades Yoshi's. Since scoring the gig, Bortnick has toured the world and recorded two albums with Scofield, as well as releasing his own solo debut, *Clean Slate*, flaunting the guitarist's distinctive Curtis-Mayfield-mixed-with-Sly-Stone vibe. Onstage, Bortnick simply holds the tunes together with his snapping guitar sound while Scofield and others explore the melody.

Rhythm guitar is all about support -- diverting the glory, hiding in the shadows. So naturally, Bortnick is a laid-back guy with a laissez-faire career strategy: Go where the music

Mark Farwald



The best rhythm guitarist in the world? Avi Bortnick

Details

Details: The John Scofield Band plays Yoshi's in Jack London Square Tuesday, August 26 through Sunday, August 31. 510-238-9200.

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takes you. Thankfully, it's led to what many would consider the gig of a lifetime: touring and recording with one of the top jazz guitarists of our time.

Bortnick came by his groove naturally, soaking it up during his upbringing in St. Louis, where he attended a predominantly black school. Musically, he clung to rock at first, but soon gave in and moved on to soul and "anything funky." He picked up guitar when he was eight, but never practiced much until high school.

Bortnick's career began when he moved to the Bay Area in 1982, graduating from UC Berkeley in '86. While working as a legal assistant, he hooked up with the Afro-beat band Kotoja. "He amazed me," raves bandleader Ken Okulolo. "He was so tight, so in the pocket. I was looking for someone who could do that, and it was really hard to find somebody."

Bortnick also started sitting in with Jeff Narell, a steel drummer. By 1988, he didn't need a day job anymore.

In the early 1990s, Bortnick got involved in the nascent San Francisco acid jazz scene that also nurtured talents like Charlie Hunter and the band Alphabet Soup. His laid-back soul vibe -- culled from his youth feasting on funk -- was a perfect match for this groove-based, wide-open jam-jazz. His band, the Dry Look, played instrumental old-school '70s funk with tongue-in-cheek flair -- covering the *Sanford and Son* theme song, for example.

But after trying the life for a few years, Bortnick decided to go back to school: "I knew I didn't want to make a living playing parties and clubs." So he fled cross-country to the University of Florida to study architectural acoustics -- designing rooms or spaces for the best sound.

But that sabbatical didn't last long. As soon as Bortnick arrived in Gainesville, he put up flyers looking to start a new band. He hooked up with bassist and singer Jerry Kennedy and started the soulful *What It Is*, a big hit throughout the funk-starved Southeast. By 1996, the group looked to be on the verge of a record deal; tiring of the Florida scene, the group's core moved to the Bay Area, where they'd developed a following and sensed more plentiful opportunity. For Bortnick, of course, it was a welcome homecoming.

The band started off well in San Francisco, but while Bortnick bolstered his reputation as a gifted rhythm player, he decided to ditch it after a few years, securing a full-time job in architectural acoustics. He played gigs as they came along, including a reunion with Jeff Narell, but his life as a professional musician was on hold again.

Then Scofield called, and loved what he heard -- the jazz icon raves that in addition to a groove that won't quit, Bortnick has the rarest of musician qualities: composure. "He's got a calm intelligence that helps us evolve," Scofield says. "And he's a great guy to hang out with." Sounds like standard praise, but in the cantankerous jazz world, unfortunately, it's not.

Ken Okulolo agrees: "It's really hard to find musicians who are cool-headed and can actually play, and are a pleasure to work with."

Bortnick, not surprisingly, seems rather amazed by the praise he generates: "I have certain musical deficiencies, but it just so happens that there are some things that I'm fairly good at, apparently," he says.

He also adapts. Since signing on with the John Scofield Band, Bortnick has added an element to his groove repertoire: He handles the samples. Onstage, he controls the sampler with foot pedals

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Johnny's Blues: A Tribute to Johnny Cash

Chris von Sneider
The Wild Horse

while he plays guitar -- Scofield calls it "a tap dance and a half."

"It's fun," Bortnick says. "It adds a new challenge and a new dimension. And I'm a bit of a geek."

But after four hundred shows with Scofield, Bortnick once again has begun contemplating settling down. The novelty of traveling and touring is wearing thin, and he's not getting any younger. Perhaps he'll get back into acoustics, but not in the Bay Area. Like Charlie Hunter, Joshua Redman, and so many other Bay Area jazz talents, Bortnick is now a New York resident: He found flying back to California during breaks on the Scofield tour too draining, and besides, no offense, but he likes what NYC has to offer. "The networking is better in New York," he says. "If you're a musician who hopes to go on the road as a side person, it's much easier to hear about opportunities or meet people or play with people who might recommend you."

Plus, he likes the hustle and bustle of the big city. "I really like the social aspect of New York, the people out and about. All these things going on, you can just step outside. It's dense, and I like that."

You can expect to hear more from Bortnick, even if he does succeed in settling down this time. Think of him as *The Godfather's* Michael Corleone: "I'll always keep going with music. My track record is that I keep trying to step out of music, and I keep getting pulled back in. It's too irresistible to play when people call."

The people who call tend to find Bortnick equally irresistible.

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