

# DATEBOOK

## Ex-session pianist follows his jazz muse

By Jesse Hamlin  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

It was the bloke upstairs they called Uncle George who got Terry Disley hooked on playing the piano. Uncle George would come downstairs for parties at the Disleys' London flat and slay the crowd with rollicking tunes like "Roll Out the Barrel." Young Terry was smitten.

"So I always wanted to do that," says Disley, a jazz player who walked away from the lucrative London studio scene a decade ago—he had recorded with Dave Stewart, George Harrison, Bryan Ferry, Mick Jagger and other British stars—to move to San Francisco and make his own music. Instead of earning \$1,500 for a three-hour session with a former Beatle, he took restaurant gigs here for \$40 a night.

It's worked out pretty well for the pianist and composer, who has weekly dates at Shanghai 1930 on Steuart Street and at the Miramar Beach Restaurant in Half Moon Bay, and who will front the nine-piece version of the tasty Terry Disley Experience at Yoshi's San Francisco on Monday. But there were moments when he questioned the wisdom of turning down tours with the Eurythmics and Roxy Music to cast his fate to the fog in San Francisco, which had bewitched him since he first played here in the 1980s with the ska band Madness.

### Started in West Portal

His first job was in a Chinese restaurant in West Portal, where he saw a hand-scrawled cardboard sign in the window soliciting a musician. It paid \$9 an hour.

"I auditioned for an \$18 gig after doing all this major stuff, but you gotta do what you gotta do," Disley says with a Cockney snap to his speech. But he played there only one night. When he went to get a beer between sets the boss steered him to the musicians' brew.

"It was this rusty-topped old beer. I started to drink it, and he said, 'No, you come here,' and he took me halfway up the



MARK CONSTANTINI / The Chronicle

**Pianist Terry Disley** at home in San Francisco—he's played with Paul McCartney, Bryan Ferry and Bob Dylan but wanted to do his own stuff.

**The Terry Disley Experience** celebrates the release of its "London Underground" CD at 8 p.m. Monday at Yoshi's, 1330 Fillmore St., San Francisco. \$10 and \$14. (415) 655-5600, [sf.yoshis.com](http://sf.yoshis.com)

To sample the music from "London Underground," go to [www.terrydisley.com](http://www.terrydisley.com)

stairs, opened a door and shut me in this closet. I was sittin' there with this bottle thinking, 'Where did I go wrong?'" Disley laughs about it now, sitting in his tidy little Nob Hill studio, which looks out to the Golden Gate Bridge. A genial

man with shaggy light-brown hair, a trim bit of facial hair and a silver hoop in his right ear, he's dressed in jeans, a pin-striped blazer and a cool pair of English wing tips fringed with fake fur. An upright piano sits against a wall beneath photos of the pianist in the studio with some of his famous associates. A shot of him and Paul McCartney is signed: "Paul, Good luck with the music career - Dizzy." A stack of synthesizers climbs the opposite wall, including one he says you could take into a session "and twiddle the knobs and look like you knew what you were doing." A pink pig balloon hangs nearby, a remnant of a recent show at the Miramar where Disley performed his jazz-trio version of Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon."



*Courtesy Terry Disley*

**Disley** in a London studio in 1993 with Paul McCartney, one of the many British pop stars he has recorded with.

### Many influences

He's a canny songwriter and arranger whose grooving and accessible music draws on the melodic, wired-up sound of Miles Davis and Weather Report, the Crusaders' elegant funk, gospel, Bach, rock and a touch of techno-pop. He usually hears an entire arrangement in his head, then gets it down at the keyboard. Sometimes he dreams them. He leaves room for improvisation—his group features such fine young soloists as trumpeter Erik Jekabson, guitarist Lorn Leber and saxophonists Charles McNeal and Alex Murzyn— but he doesn't encourage long solos.

"I still have an idea about wanting to entertain people," says Disley, a solid soloist with a feeling for Joe Sample, Ray Charles and Oscar Peterson. Like many British musicians, he flipped for American music as a kid. He dug Miles and Robert Johnson, played boogie and blues as well as Beethoven.

"All the other kids at school were into David Bowie and whatever was happening in England, but I was more taken

with Charlie Parker and Miles," says Disley, 51. He practiced relentlessly as a kid and went to the Salterton School of Music. After graduation, he swept London streets for three years while writing and playing jazz (he was into Charles Mingus at the time). A regular at Ronnie Scott's famed London club, Disley looked down his nose at pop musicians. But after playing a few pop dates, he warmed to the music and the rewards.

"I got out of debt within a couple of weeks," says Disley, who toured in the 1990s with Acoustic Alchemy, the popular British band that played music first dubbed New Age jazz, then smooth jazz. He became Dave Stewart's musical director, playing and arranging music for dates with Stewart and other artists Stewart produced records for at the London studio he owned with Jagger, among them Ferry, Harrison and Marianne Faithfull. He learned a lot from Stewart, with whom he toured Japan backing Bob Dylan, but felt hamstrung in the studio, where he played bits and pieces but rarely a song straight through.

"I'd just been working with McCartney and earning all this money, but I wasn't really playing very much," Disley says. "I reached the point where I didn't want to carry on doing that sort of anonymous session thing. I like to go out there and really play."

### Cherry-picking talent

After that first ill-fated restaurant job, Disley got a nightly \$40 gig at the venerable, now-closed Mayes Oyster House on Polk Street. That's where he met his lady friend and partner, Janet Johlgren. He met a lot of musicians here through trumpeter Eddie Henderson and began putting together bands, cherry-picking some of the town's best young players. His new Terry Disley Experience CD, "London Underground," features prime playing by McNeal, Murzyn, Leber, Jekabson, bassists Joel Smith and Dan Feiszli, drummer Jason Lewis, percussionists Valentino Pellizzer and Marquinho Brasil and Patrick Bettison on harmonica.

"I'm trying to do something that covers all these styles but isn't cliched in any one thing," Disley says.

The other night, English rocker Angie Pollock came by after playing the Fillmore with the glam-rock dance band Goldfrapp. "She was poundin' away at the piano at 4 o'clock in the mornin'," Disley says. "I was sure we were going to get thrown out of here. But nobody has ever complained. The neighbors are wonderful. I practice a lot of classical music. They just sit in their places and look out and listen."