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Return of the Prodigious Son

Jazz guitarist Charlie Hunter revisits the Bay Area, energized and uncorrupted by the bustle of New York City

**By Jonathan Seff**

Some might say that a person would have to be crazy to abandon life here for New York City. But for Charlie Hunter, the beautiful Bay Area was a barren wasteland.

"I felt that as a musician it was just as expensive for me to live in the Bay Area," the 31-year-old jazz guitarist says. "But there were no employment opportunities for me other than playing just the local nightclubs." So, disillusioned and looking for a career boost, he packed up his eight-string guitar and moved to Brooklyn.

Hunter grew up in Berkeley and attended Berkeley High School, which is known for its music program, although Hunter didn't participate in it. Instead, he learned the basics from guitarist Joe Satriani. He says he wasn't any special pupil, "just one of 50 or 60 local guitar players." Berkeley High did, however, have some bearing on his first real taste of success: Hunter recruited alumnus tenor saxophonist Dave Ellis for what would become, along with Jay Lane on drums, the Charlie Hunter Trio. (Both have since been a part of

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The trio's big break was landing a weekly gig at the Elbo Room in the heart of the Mission District. Their first show was on a Tuesday night with a \$3 cover. Twenty-five people showed up. But Elbo General Manager Dennis Ring let the guitarist build steam, and after about six months, Hunter was drawing upward of 600 people for his two-set shows.

It was hard work. "Every time he played, he was there early to set up, unlike lots of other musicians," Ring says. At one point, Hunter and crew played 85 consecutive Tuesdays without a break. Hunter preferred Tuesdays, Ring remembers, because it was less crazy than on the weekends, and the fans who came out during the week were more dedicated. "After a year he asked if we could raise the cover to \$4," Ring says with a chuckle.

He agreed.

As Hunter's popularity grew, so did the size of the band. The trio became a quartet and then a quintet, with local percussionist John Santos and alto sax player Calder Spanier enriching the sound. But at the heart of the music were Hunter and his custom-made eight-string guitar, on which he rhythmically picked the bass notes on three strings while skillfully articulating well-planned melodies on the other five.

"The way I think about it is, the eight-string is to the guitar what the drum set is to drums," says Hunter.

"Originally you have a guy down in New Orleans playing a bass drum with a little cymbal on it and

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Recently in **Music**

another guy playing a snare drum, right? And eventually some guy put them together and created a whole vocabulary for that instrument as a drum set.

"There's been a vocabulary for the guitar and a vocabulary for the bass, and what I'm trying to do is establish some kind of vocabulary for this instrument."

Of course, having the bass and guitar parts unified in one instrument does have its limitations. The two registers are invariably tied together, and one can only stray and wander the frets as far as the hand can stretch. But with Hunter's touch and groove, it's easy to forget that the same man is playing both parts.

Following a self-titled debut release on Les Claypool's Prawn Song label in 1994 (Hunter had opened for Primus a year earlier as part of the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy), Hunter was soon signed by Blue Note. He and his protean band churned out a number of ever-maturing albums, including a jazz rendition of Bob Marley's Natty Dread disc for the Blue Note Cover Series.

But by 1997, Hunter felt there was a musical vacuum forming in the Bay Area. "It felt to me like there wasn't really any place for musicians anymore, or the culture that produced musicians like me, Dave Ellis, Josh Redman, Benny Green, and countless others," he says.

Hunter's first significantly revamped lineup appeared on an album recorded in September 1997 with some old friends in San Francisco. Then, for 1998's *Return of the Candyman*, the debut of Pound for Pound, Hunter

gathered pals Scott Amendola and John Santos for percussion. He also recruited vibraphonist Stefon Harris to create a completely different sound, one conspicuously lacking horns. (When it came time to tour the country with the New Orleans band Galactic, the percussionists were tied down to their Bay Area bases and Harris had other obligations -- as a result, Monte Croft took over on the vibraphone with Willard Dyson on drums.)

But the economic realities of being a jazz musician in Northern California convinced Hunter it was time to venture forth. Soon after the tour, he relocated to Brooklyn, something he now calls "one of the best moves I've ever made."

"The only thing I miss about the Bay Area are a few restaurants -- but I'm not going to give them any free advertising," he adds with a laugh. "And I still have a few friends there," he says more seriously.

Upon settling in New York City, Hunter found himself surrounded by the talent he'd been seeking. "The great thing about New York," he says, "is whatever you want, the best person in the world is here. Moving here put me in a position where I was playing with people who were so much better than I was that I just had to become a better musician -- I just had to deal."

Continuing the trend of slimming down he had begun with Pound for Pound, Hunter's new album with percussionist Leon Parker is aptly titled Duo. "I like small groups," he says. "It's just the way I hear stuff and the way I operate at this point in time."

Although Hunter deftly covers the bass and guitar parts on Duo, in the end it's just him and Parker, which can be daunting to even the most experienced player. "Talk about fear," Hunter admits. "Doing a two-man album is like doing an expedition to the South Pole, naked, with no dogs. You're just out there, exposed big-time."

But the album gave both players a lot more space for exploration, which Hunter feels has made him a better musician. And if you're with the right person, he reasons, it gives you the leeway to make sudden turns -- it's easier to communicate one-on-one. "For Duo we had a one-hour rehearsal -- we didn't rehearse at all for this record. I just wanted to give Leon the basic outlines, just to put a germ of an idea in his head as far as what kinds of rhythms he wanted to play over them. And when we went in the studio, whatever happened happened."

What happened is a collection of 10 songs teeming with soulful cadence and feisty emotion, whether on the bluesy, conversational "Do That Then," the boldly mysterious "Dark Corner," or the heavy, dirgelike "You Don't Know What Love Is." In the past, Hunter's covered artists from Nirvana to Steve Miller, and here he offers up a version of "Don't Talk" from the Beach Boys' quintessential 1966 album Pet Sounds.

The pair also experiments with Latin rhythms on "Mean Streak," "The Last Time," and "The Spin Seekers," the album's longest track. And with infectious rhythms on cuts like "Calypso for Grandpa," a spirited ode to Hunter's octogenarian progenitor that would even make

Harry Belafonte get up and jump in the line, it is obvious that this record is as much Leon Parker as it is Charlie Hunter.

"I feel like Duo is my first record as a musical adult," he says. "On that record I feel like I just started to be able to find some semblance of my own voice, the very beginnings of it." Replacing Parker on the West Coast tour, including Hunter's upcoming stint at Yoshi's, is Adam Cruz, who has played with the likes of McCoy Tyner and Chick Corea.

Cruz, who also plays steel pan, marimba, and piano, and is a former roommate of Parker's in New York, should fit in nicely. Hunter comments, "I think they both have their own voice, but they have similar musical sensibilities."

So how has the move affected the Berkeley native?

"Oh man, it's changed me immeasurably. The environment breeds a certain intensity and dedication -- I'm much more focused. In New York, you don't get to jump in your car and drive to the local super-duper supermarket," he says. "But what you lose in those kinds of material-based quality-of-life things, you gain in the spiritually based quality-of-life things.

"For what I do as a musician, trying to be creative," he adds, "the latter is much more important."

Charlie Hunter performs Thursday through Sunday, March 25-28, at Yoshi's, 510 Embarcadero West, Oakland. Tickets are \$16-20; call (510) 238-9200. He also performs Friday, March 26, at 4 p.m. at Amoeba

Music, 1855 Haight, S.F. The show is free; call 831-1200.

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