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LEAP OF FAITH

BY JERRY KARP

What's a nice Jewish jazz saxophonist like Anton Schwartz doing with an EP of Christmas songs?

"No. 1, it's a fact of jazz life," Schwartz says. "You play Christmas gigs, you know? So you play a gig, and on the way home, the music is bouncing around in your head. Something new comes together and you put it down on paper, so the next time you don't have to play the music the same way."

The 37-year-old East Bay musician will be marking the release of the five-song "Holiday Time" CD with a performance Tuesday at Yoshi's.

"I had this oddball arrangement of 'Jingle Bells,'" Schwartz says, doing his best to be heard over the espresso machine in a Polk Street coffeehouse shortly after performing at the Old First Church in San Francisco as part of that institution's monthly Jazz Vespers series. "To tell you the truth, I was laughing out loud when I wrote it. I'm sitting at the piano, playing 'Jingle Bells' like I'm (modern jazz icon) Bill Evans. I realized, hey, there's a lot of fun in this stuff. My style is not to bowl the audience over with pyrotechnics. I try to make the kind of music people can sink their teeth into. A hook. A groove. Interesting twists, dynamics over the course of the tune. The holiday stuff is a great vehicle for that. It gives you a chance to relate in the spirit of a pre-existing understanding and then add everything you want on top of that."

Schwartz has built a strong Bay Area following on the basis of his warm, generous tone, impeccably developed solos and infectious performance energy. He's active as an instructor as well, teaching at the Stanford Jazz Workshop and the JazzSchool in Berkeley. At Yoshi's, he'll be playing with members of his current quartet (pianist Taylor Eigsti, bassist John Shifflett and



Anton Schwartz: He was a mathematician until an illness changed his direction toward jazz.

drummer Tim Bulkley), along with teenage guitarist Julian Lage.

His relaxed, engaging "Holiday Time" can be enjoyed as seasonal fare or taken straight as a fine jazz recording. Schwartz takes "Jingle Bells" out for a breezy, good-natured spin, and reworks "Winter Wonderland" with a gentle reggae beat and "Sleigh Ride" with an upbeat Latin flavor. "The Christmas Song" and "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning" get entrancing ballad treatments.

While Schwartz began playing jazz in his teens, the New York native never expected to make a career of music. The world of cutting-edge mathematics seemed his

true calling. He went to Harvard, where he earned bachelor's degrees in mathematics and philosophy, and then came west to Stanford to pursue a doctorate in artificial intelligence.

"It never occurred to me that I could be a musician," he says. "My whole identity was so wrapped up in being a mathematics whiz kid. I just figured that was the contribution I had to make to the world, doing something bizarre and far-flung and fascinating."

But his body revolted.

"I was doing doctoral work and I was really into it," he says. "I felt like I was at the height of my game. I was a visiting researcher

THE ANTON SCHWARTZ QUINTET

performs at 8 and 10 p.m. Tuesday at Yoshi's, 510 Embarcadero West, Oakland. \$10-\$15. (510) 238-9200; www.yoshis.com.

at the University of Bonn, meeting people, writing papers. It was exciting. But I started getting physically sick. In fact, my body basically shut down."

The illness started with a cold that Schwartz couldn't shake. Within months, he had so little energy he couldn't carry on a social life. Although never formally diagnosed, Schwartz came to realize that it was the academic lifestyle, the long hours in fluorescent-lighted rooms, that was jamming his circuits. He left academia in 1994 with no idea what to do next. Then he turned to music.

Schwartz led groups in restaurants and clubs all over the Bay Area, and soon the work and hustle began to pay off. A pair of self-produced CDs, "When Music Calls" (1998) and "The Slow Lane" (2000) received glowing reviews in *Billboard* and *Down Beat* magazines, and national club tours followed.

The scientist turned musician says there's a natural connection between the two worlds.

"Both are nonverbal, meaning nonlinguistic, modes of thought and communication," he says. "Also, music theory is abstract algebra. It's a group of order twelve with specific properties. In jazz, recurring chord changes and structure are essential parts of the music. To take the music on a journey that loops back on itself is a technically challenging thing. I have six bars to get from where I am to where I need to be. And I need to stay true to this melodic line and project through chord changes that will take me harmonically where I want to go. It's a tough constraint-satisfaction problem to solve." ■

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