

Guitarist Keys' trio improvises fiercely

By Andrew Gilbert

Special to the Mercury News

With his lean single-note style, veteran jazz guitarist Calvin Keys is a subtle but forceful improviser. His style will be on display this weekend when his trio, featuring bassist David McKinney and drummer David Rokeach, performs as part of the Stanford Jazz Workshop's Second Sunday series at Stanford University's Campbell Recital Hall.

Keys' trio has developed into a cohesive unit capable of generating a fierce sense of swing. He credits his long tenure in Ahmad Jamal's quartet with honing his pianistic approach to the guitar.

"Working with Ahmad, I guess I devel-

"Working with Ahmad Jamal, I guess I developed a certain emotional drive."

—CALVIN KEYS

oped a certain emotional drive," Keys says. "Ahmad is a master of time. I would characterize it using the old Caucasian way of describing this music, jungle music. It has that force. I felt it deep inside my bones the first time I heard Ahmad." It was "just like the first time I heard Monk play. It was that powerful, or I wouldn't have bothered with it."

Jamal first hired Keys in 1974, when the guitarist came off the road with Ray Charles and was living in Los Angeles (he settled in Oakland in 1975). Keys spent the next six years touring the world as part of Jamal's quartet with bassist Jamil Nasser and drummer Frank Gant. He left Jamal in 1980 to freelance, but he has returned to work with the pianist many times.

"Calvin is one of my favorite players,"



Calvin Keys credits his long tenure in Ahmad Jamal's quartet with honing his pianistic approach to the guitar.

SCOTT CHERNIS

says Jamal. "He's been one of my mainstays for years. He has a tremendous warmth and technical facility in his work, and he's very serious about what he does. He's a consummate gentleman and humanitarian."

Keys, born and raised in Omaha, Neb., started teaching himself guitar as a teenager, when he would sneak over and play his uncle Ivory's Gibson, even though he'd been warned away from the instrument with the threat of a whipping. When his uncle caught him one day, he was so impressed that the youngster had learned some chords by watching him play Delta blues that he gave his nephew his prized instrument.

"For the next six months I was up all night with that guitar," Keys says.

He landed his first paying gig at 17, working a Sioux City, Iowa, joint called Po' Boys Club 54 with an R&B band called Doctor Spider and his Rock and Roll Web. Keys recalls the music scene around Omaha as a talent-laden environment that was constantly enriched by traveling players. In one memorable encounter, the blues singer and alto saxophonist Eddie Cleanhead Vinson called him out at a jam session and taught him the chords to the Miles Davis tune "Four." When Keys returned the next week ready to show off the solo he had developed on the chord changes of "Four," Vinson called a different Davis piece, "Tune Up."

"Cleanhead really inspired me to start doing some other kinds of research," Keys says.

The guitarist spent most of the '60s on

the road playing with various organ combos, including brief stints with Jimmy Smith and Jack McDuff and longer runs with Jackie Ivory, Jackie Davis and Frank Edwards, who provided Keys with a strong jazz history foundation.

"Frank turned me on to Duke Ellington and Count Basie and the real music," Keys says. "He knew all the tunes. After I cut Frank loose, I was after something else, but I wasn't sure what. But I knew I wanted to get my own band and do my own thing."

Since coming off the road with Jamal, Keys has led various groups of his own and recorded a number of albums for local labels such as Black Jazz and Life Force. His latest release is the scorching R&B-oriented session "Detours Into Unconscious Rhythms" on Wide Hive Records. Although a quadruple heart bypass operation in 1997 slowed him down for a minute, he has come back strong, playing, recording and teaching with gusto.

"I just turned 60, and I feel like I'm 25, and I'm enjoying every breath I take," Keys says. "I'm having so much fun. If I left out of here today, I have no regrets. But the next 10 years are going to be the most beautiful 10 years of my life."

■ CALVIN KEYS

Where: Campbell Recital Hall, Stanford University

When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday

Tickets: \$20

Call: (650) 725-2787

Keys likes to lend hands to JazzMasters Workshop

When Bruce Forman was creating the JazzMasters Workshop, the non-profit organization that provides free weekly jazz guitar clinics to any young musician who shows up at one of the four sites around the Bay Area, he knew the perfect candidate to recruit as a teacher.

Forman turned to Calvin Keys, the same consummate musician who had served as his mentor some 25 years before, when he was a budding young guitarist eager to soak up any and all jazz experience possible.

"Calvin let me sit in and was

very encouraging," Forman says. "I even subbed for him when I was in high school. So having him agree to do the workshops was great. There's a continuity of the mentoring cycle. As much as he's technically proficient and versed in the tradition, Calvin is a natural. His playing is so deep in the pocket and comes off so elegant and effortless. I know how hard it is to do what he's doing."

The JazzMasters program recently marked its milestone 250th free clinic (adults are also welcome for a \$20 fee). Since the organization was founded

in January 2001, Keys has taught more workshops than any other guitarist except Forman. For Keys, the program offers an opportunity to pass on the knowledge he gleaned during his years playing the chitlin' circuit with bluesy organ combos, touring with Ray Charles, serving as musical director for Earl "Fatha" Hines and collaborating with pianist Ahmad Jamal.

Keys conducts his next round of workshops March 18 at the Carmel Youth Center, March 19 in Mountain View at the Guitar Activity Center,

March 20 at Enrico's in San Francisco's North Beach, and March 21 at the Alice Arts Center in Oakland. See www.jazzmastersworkshop.org for information on workshop dates and locations.

"There's a whole new crop coming up, and they're going to develop some different things; you watch," says Keys, 60. "There's a certain torch being passed around. That torch was passed to me at some point in my life, and I'm trying to keep it burning by handing it on to some of these youngsters."

—Andrew Gilbert