Pop Talk: Frisell and Leisz pack a punch on guitar

by George Varga

If music were like boxing, you might expect an introduction like this when guitar mavericks Bill Frisell and Greg Leisz perform together:

"In the left corner, ladies and gents, is Greg Leisz, a man so versatile he's played on albums by Beck, Wilco, Smashing Pumpkins, Joni Mitchell, Paul Westerberg, k.d. lang, Bad Religion, Matthew Sweet, Brian Wilson and Fiona Apple.

BILL FRISELL - Guitar maverick Bill Frisell has played with Lucinda Williams, Chet Baker, John Zorn, Ginger Baker, Allen Ginsberg, Marianne Faithfull, Elvis Costello, Norah Jones, Paul Simon and fellow guitarists John Scofield and Jim Hall. CNS Photo By Jimmy Katz.

GREG LEISZ - Greg Leisz has spent his career as a behind-the-scenes instrumental wiz. He has played on albums by Beck, Wilco, Smashing Pumpkins, Joni Mitchell, Paul Westerberg, k.d. lang, Bad Religion, Matthew Sweet, Brian Wilson and Fiona Apple. CNS Photo courtesy of William Claxton.

"And in the even more left corner is Bill Frisell, a man so versatile he's played with Lucinda Williams, Chet Baker, John Zorn, Ginger Baker, Allen Ginsberg, Marianne Faithfull, Elvis Costello, Norah Jones, Paul Simon and fellow guitarists John Scofield and Jim Hall."

Frisell and Leisz are close friends and collaborators, not competitors. And while both have heavyweight credentials, they match up so closely it's almost impossible to give one an edge over the other. Almost, that is, except for the fact Leisz was used as a clue on the TV show "Jeopardy!" a few years ago.

"Yeah, that's something I'm striving for!" Frisell said. "Not that I ever watch that show, but that would have been mind-blowing to see."

Leisz, who has spent his career as a behind-the-scenes instrumental wiz, regards his "Jeopardy!" moment as the second most embarrassing incident of his professional life. The first was when lang, whose Grammy-winning "Ingenue" album prominently features him, hailed Leisz for having "single-handedly liberated pedal steel (guitar) from the bondage of country (music)."

"Everything's a little tongue-in-cheek with k.d., but my feeling is that quote is a complete fallacy, in every sense of the word," Leisz said from his home in Calabasas, Calif. "Because I grew up not listening to country music. ... And if you delve into it, you find pedal steel was liberated from country music long before it ever got imprisoned."

A master of the pedal steel, lap pedal steel, dobro and conventional six-string guitar, Leisz first gained fleeting national prominence in 1976 as a member of the short-lived Funky Kings. Co-founded by California singer-songwriter Jack Tempchin, the Kings' released a self-titled debut album that still ranks as an undiscovered classic of its time.

The band's commercial failure convinced Leisz he would be happier playing in the shadows, and he has done just that ever since. Like Frisell, with whom he has collaborated on albums by Lucinda Williams and Loudon Wainwright III, Leisz has the rare ability to shine in any musical setting.

"That's one of the greatest things about this job: People's emotional reactions," Leisz said. "It's not about getting paid. I mean, that's nice, too. But when someone comes up, and says: 'I never could explain to you what I wanted, but you did the perfect thing and I don't know how you did it,' wow. That's such a great feeling."

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