

## Meet Terry Disley (and try not to be impressed by his friends)

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Terry Disley is no shameless name-dropper, but you'd surely excuse him if he was. After all, his names are pretty damn impressive; I'm sure his Rolodex is a sight to behold. The London-born keyboardist-composer got his start playing jazz at the city's famed Ronnie Scott's, where his group opened for the likes of [McCoy Tyner](#) and Cedar Walton in the early '80s. He spent the ensuing 15 years moving from pop-rock work (Billy Bragg, Bon Jovi, Madness, Dave Stewart, among many others) and recording and touring with [Acoustic Alchemy](#), with some film work thrown in as well. More jazz, too, including sitting in with Branford Marsalis and recording with [Dee Dee Bridgewater](#). Touring the States with AA inspired Disley to move here in 1997. He has since established himself on the Northern California jazz scene, playing both smooth and straight-ahead jazz. He has regular gigs at the Miramar Beach Restaurant in Half Moon Bay and the Washington Square Bar and Grill in San Francisco, sometimes solo and sometimes with his band, the Experience. He plays both this Sunday. The holiday season brings an additional format, as Disley and his group perform his original work "The Jazzcracker." This year's schedule includes dates December 4 in San Francisco, December 13 in Redwood City, December 20 in Sonoma and December 23 at Yoshi's in San Francisco. For Disley's full itinerary, click [here](#) and check out the live clip below.

**Question:** The place to start this is to ask about your regular gigs. What is the vibe at Miramar Beach and Washington Square?

**Disley:** I am lucky in that I am out there playing a lot of dates locally, both as a solo pianist and with my group. All the venues are completely different from each other – and very different from any venues I came across in England. For example, I love playing solo piano at the Miramar Beach Restaurant, where I have been resident pianist for six years now. It is the most amazing location – perched on the edge of the Pacific Ocean with spectacular views. Saturday evenings tend to be more boisterous than the Sunday brunch, which attracts an older family crowd. I tend to play to the demographic and play a wide variety of material at this one. I usually include [Beatles](#), (can't go wrong with Beatles tunes), old show tunes and classical music for the brunch, and play more jazz, blues and classic rock covers for the Saturday crowd. At the Washington

Square Bar and Grill Thursday and Sunday evenings; I tend to play more jazz and throw in some rock covers and original compositions, too. I keep an eye on the crowd and try to guess what they would like to hear. If I get it right, then they tip! This venue is a San Francisco institution and it's a true honor to play here.

**Question:** How did you form the Experience? What qualities do you look for in band members?

**Disley:** I put together the Experience group from various great players I encountered here. The band members have changed constantly over the six years since its conception. Some wonderful musicians have come and gone and I am grateful to all of them for being part of the process. The first couple of albums focused on a smooth-jazz format, using funk and electronics mixed with the jazz. The latest CD, "West Coast Jazz Impressions," is a return to the straight-ahead jazz format. I choose the musicians depending on their abilities, of course, but also on which style I am going for at the time. I am fortunate that there are so many great players here in the Bay Area that want to play with me.

**Question:** The holiday season is coming up and you have "Jazzcracker" performances. It seems to me that, for all the efforts of someone like Dave Brubeck, jazz and classical still have something of an uneasy alliance.

**Disley:** There are actually some great recordings mixing classical and jazz. One of my all-time favorites is clarinetist Eddie Daniels' album "Breakthrough." In the case of "The Jazzcracker," I wanted to make a holiday recording that was more substantial than the usual material out there and came up with the idea of re-arranging the pieces from Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite" as if they were being played by a traditional jazz quintet. I used all acoustic instruments, just a hint of keyboards with the rhythm section, along with flute, clarinet, trumpet, flugelhorn and sax. The musicians' charts were written out like you'd find on a typical jazz gig – just top line and chords and were very simplistic. I altered the tempos and time signatures and took great liberties with the material, (in fact some people don't even recognize the pieces from the original versions). For example, on my version of the "Dance of the Reed Flutes," there's no flute in sight, and I set my version of the "Nutcracker March" as a waltz in 3/4 time. It all works very well and I believe the arrangements can be enjoyed in their own right rather than seeing them as jazz re-workings of the classical "Nutcracker." In a live setting like Yoshi's, the show plays like a regular jazz concert.

**Question:** You have worked with an impressive roster of pop stars, including such heroes of mine as Brian Wilson, Van Morrison, George Harrison and Paul McCartney. I am also, however, a huge Acoustic Alchemy fan. How did you get involved with AA and what you see as the group's impact on jazz/smooth jazz/acoustic music. Also what can you tell us about Nick Webb, both as a man and musician?

**Disley:** I was lucky enough to work with a who's who of rock and jazz legends. It started with Madness and Van Morrison and ended up with my job as musical director for Dave Stewart of Eurythmics, playing sessions for McCartney, George Harrison, Bon Jovi, Bryan Ferry, etc. In between, I had a long spell with Acoustic Alchemy, which really inspired me to move to America. I got a call out of the blue from Greg Carmichael. He had been the guitarist in my group a few years back and Alchemy needed a keyboard player to play some live dates. Greg thought of me, hence the call. I actually stayed with them for six years recording, touring and co-writing. At that time, around 1988, the smooth-jazz radio format was just getting off the ground. It was called New Age jazz back then. Alchemy took off just as the format started and became one of the biggest acts of the genre. It was a very strange feeling to be recognized in the street after what was effectively a "jazz gig." We played opposite Yellowjackets, Grover Washington, Spyro Gyra, the Rippingtons and it was a wonderful period. I much preferred it to touring with the rock bands. The music was closer to my heart and one could actually stretch out and play some solos rather than just playing set keyboard parts which is the case in most pop and rock shows. Alchemy set a trend and before we knew it there were a whole range of acoustic guitar-based smooth-jazz groups. Even the huge smooth-jazz star Peter White hinted to me that he saw what the late Nick Webb was doing and headed that direction. Nick, the founder of the band, was a powerhouse of energy, totally driven to make a name for the band. He was relentless in following through and promoting the group across America. He was also a wonderful composer, taking great care to hone the material until he was absolutely happy with it. Rather than coming from jazz he was very influenced by the Beatles, John Renbourn, classical guitarists and folk music. It was his idea to combine the steel-string guitar with the nylon-string, defining the classic Acoustic Alchemy sound. Those early Alchemy albums still stand up after all this time, as do those of Bob James, Dave Grusin and Joe Sample, chiefly because of the compositions. It's a shame that so many clones have latched on the smooth jazz scene churning out watered down imitations of those original pioneers. After all, how many Kenny G's do we really need?

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