

GOIN' UP COUNTRY

When Bill Bresnahan reaches over to pick up the guitar, you know you're going to hear what he calls "a little piece of business," a finely polished jazz gem, played with subtlety and swing. His goal as a teacher has always been to pass on these gems and tips he picked up from the masters. After 25 years of teaching for Berklee's Guitar Department, Bres (as he is fondly known by his peers and students) retired in May.

Bres attended the original Schillinger House in the 1950s on the G.I. Bill. The entire student body at the time numbered about forty, and he was one of only two guitar students at the school studying with Ted Simonelli. There was only one big band at the school then, but there was also a "combo ensemble." Bres remembers that the teacher, Pete Cutler—who could play in 7/8 time while talking—would sit at the piano surrounded by students. Each student would take a turn soloing.

Bres remembers that as he took his turn, he thought he was doing okay, but after hearing a tape of the session, his perspective changed. "God protects us from knowing how badly we play," he says. "When I heard the tape I was shocked!" Cutler's encouraging assessment was simply, "So you just have to practice."

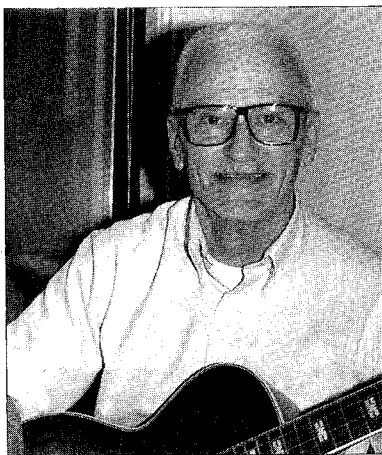


PHOTO BY MARK SMALL

Bill Bresnahan: A Bill Leavitt protégé, retiring after 25 years.

Bres was looking for more structure in his guitar studies when he ran into Bill Leavitt and was impressed watching him read through parts at a band rehearsal. Lawrence Berk later brought Leavitt onto the Berklee faculty.

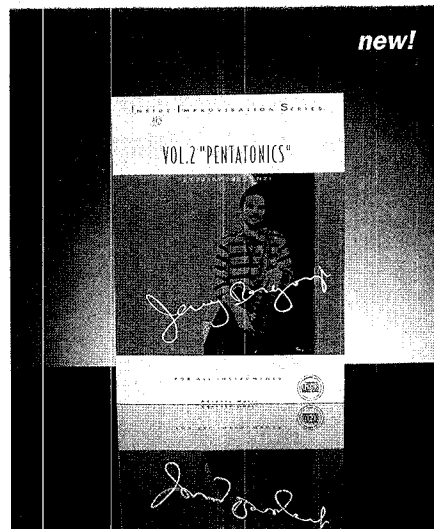
In his years of study with Leavitt, not only did Bres find the structure he was seeking, but he was also introduced to the Boston music scene. He went to all the clubs where Leavitt played to listen and learn. Leavitt got Bres his first club gig backing up singers. When Leavitt became the chairman of Berklee's Guitar Department, Bres was one of the first instructors he hired.

Bres can look back on a long and rich teaching and performing career. His musical path has led him to become acquainted with some of the finest players in the business. He and the late Wes Montgomery became good friends. One of his fondest memories is of a day in a local club when Wes Montgomery said to him, "I want you to go up and play a couple of tunes for my birthday." Bres went up and sat in with Montgomery's rhythm section, including the great Wynton Kelly.

Looking back on his years at Berklee, Bres states, "It seems like it went by very fast—until the final weeks. Then it was kind of like the week before Christmas when you are a kid." Bres looks forward to life at his new home in New Hampshire where he plans to pursue his many other interests like running, hiking, target shooting (he says it's great for developing focus), expanding his laser disc collection, and learning more about animal rights.

Berklee has been fortunate to have a teacher like Bres for the past quarter of a century, passing on the rich heritage of jazz guitar to new generations of guitar students.

—Steve Carter '80
Associate Professor, Guitar



Jerry Bergonzi

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