



Guitarist Chris Jentsch Goes Underground to Live Large on Retrospective Series

Two years ago, a homemade birthday present guitarist Chris Jentsch gave to a friend spawned an archival project that reaches back to the early 1990s. The bandleader picked through a decade of unreleased performances for the gift, extracting 14 guitar solos—none of them longer than three-and-a-half minutes. It was Frank Zappa’s *Shut Up ’N Play Yer Guitar* with a personal twist, and just like that, *Strings In Motion* became Volume One of the career-spanning Jentsch Underground series.

Re-packaging history is an integral part of Jentsch’s career, but digging through the archives for inspiration is far from an exercise in nostalgia. In 1999, Jentsch recorded *Miami Suite*, the first entry in a trilogy wedded to the sounds of urban environments. With the addition of *Brooklyn Suite* in 2005 and 2009’s *Cycles Suite*, which were both released on Fleur De Son Classics, Jentsch created a series of long-form compositions rooted in the small combo tunes he wrote as a young musician. The guitarist transformed the original sparse arrangements by transcribing live solos and orchestrating them into expansive works for his 17-person Jentsch Group Large.

Grants and other subsidies facilitate Jentsch’s music. The New York State Council of the Arts commissioned *Cycles Suite*, and an award from the American Composers Forum enabled Jentsch to write and record *Brooklyn Suite*. Jentsch says grant writing is a complicated but necessary process with a few drawbacks that tend to box music into certain categories.

“The winners tend to be educated in a certain kind of way—you get this music that is created by educated people that might be different from more earthy kinds of jazz,” Jentsch said. “Some people smear grant music. Sometimes they feel like it’s needlessly eclectic or too combinatorial of classical and jazz. I can sense that some people feel that kind of music has an ugly sign around its neck.”

Jentsch has a hard time generating popular appeal for a big band full of lesser-known musicians that stays far afield of dance music. So, without grants, the guitarist wouldn’t be able to bring his band together. Unless a huge shift in popularity is on the horizon, scheduling for the Jentsch Group Large is at the mercy of the grant process.

“I’m always writing grants here and there for different ideas and different ensembles,” he said. “If something like that hits, we’ll get the band back together.”

In addition to culling tracks for the Underground project, Jentsch is busying himself with *Fractured Pop*, his first small ensemble album in a decade. The guitarist recorded 10 tracks for the disc in September. The CD, which doesn’t yet have a release date, draws material from the same compositional well that birthed his suites. The majority of the pieces date back to Jentsch’s earliest days as a working musician, tracks that have never been heard in their original form.

“I got diverted with the large ensemble projects,” he said, “and I never wound up releasing a CD for small group doing those songs.”

Jentsch records live in the studio, but he likes to make subsequent trips to the booth to thicken things up using overdubs. He might replace snippets of music to make them more crisp or add acoustic and electric guitar parts to create richer textures. The Underground tunes, which have until now been part of his personal collection, range from a mastered studio sound to “a high-quality bootleg vibe,” he said. Additional Jentsch Underground volumes include material written with his first band, Project X, and alternate live versions of his suites. Plans are to make the entire series available at Jentsch’s Web site and as a digital download through CD Baby. As he said, “Then I could look forward to a check from CD Baby for \$6 every year.”

—Jon Ross