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Tagged: Sybil Seely (right) shows her affection for Buster Keaton in *One Week*.

Films' score

Guitarist Bill Frisell adds live soundtracks to Keaton movies at SFJF's "Jazz on Film."

By Derk Richardson

IT'S KIND OF amazing to me that I've gotten to this point where I'm actually doing recordings and interviews and everything," says Bill Frisell, the jazz-rock guitarist whose hesitant, self-effacing demeanor is belied by his musical superheros. "I feel like I can hardly play the instrument. As I get older, it's really hard to see any kind of progress — as a player or as a writer. I'm just trying to make things clearer, and get more directly to the heart of the music."

But until somebody comes along with more creative manipulations of electric guitar dynamics, the 43-year-old Baltimore native remains the standard-setter for innovative sounds in the nebulous region of postmodern fusion. Since the mid-'80s releases of his first recordings for ECM, the shy, soft-spoken Frisell has bedazzled audiences with his personalized mingling of harmonies, phrasings, and timbres absorbed and transmuted from such jazz and rock influences as Jim Hall, John McLaughlin, and Jimi Hendrix.

His tenures at ECM and now Elektra have yielded such classic albums as *Rambler*, *Where in the World*, *Have a Little Faith*, and *This Land*. He has become the preferred guitar voice for such collaborators as saxophonist/composer John Zorn, drummer Paul Motion, and premiere tribute-album producer Hal Willner. And a spate of new releases has him playing alongside drummers Ginger Baker (in a jazz power trio) and Michael Shrieve (in an organ combo with Wayne Horvitz).

Always on the prowl for new inspirations, Frisell, who now lives

in Seattle after a decade in and around New York City, recently embarked on a new enterprise, which he will bring to the Castro Theatre this Saturday for the San Francisco Jazz Festival's "Jazz on Film — Pre-Festival Day at the Movies": providing live musical accompaniment to the 1920s silent films of Buster Keaton. Although the idea is not original to Frisell — the Bay Area's Clubfoot Orchestra has already added *Sherlock Junior* to its repertoire of live-movie accompaniment — he brings a distinctively personal twist to the project, evoking a broad range of moods and emotions in musical tapestries sewn with his regular bassist Kermit Driscoll and drummer Joey Baron.

The guitarist stumbled across the concept last year when bookers at St. Anne's Church in Brooklyn suggested it for a special Frisell trio concert in their space. He has since recorded scores for six short Keaton films. Elektra is planning to release the music in two single-CD volumes.

In many ways, the pairing was a natural.

"I guess I made kind of a spiritual connection," he says, laughing. "I knew I liked him, but it wasn't like I was any kind of expert on Keaton. Then I really started watching the films more carefully and got deeper and deeper into it. The feeling of his stuff is so complex. It's funny, of course, but then it's incredibly sad at the same time. I'd watch little parts of the films over and over again, and every time I'd see new things. There's always the amazing physical stuff that Keaton's doing, but there are the emotional things, as well. So much nuance."

Frisell had never before tried to shape his music to visual cues. But his recent Americana album covers, the impressionistic textures of his playing, and such evocative titles as "No Man's Land," "Hard Plains Drifter," "Yuba City," and "Strange Meeting" have prompted listeners to attach their own visual images to the music. "That's always happened," he says. "I'll write music and then people seem to get their own visual picture from it. I won't say it doesn't matter, but there's a lot of room for interpretation. Things don't always have to be the obvious."

Likewise for Buster Keaton, who may have been the Bill Frisell of silent comedies. "It's really kind of fascinating how, in a literal sense, what I did was so wrong in certain places," Frisell says of his virgin scoring effort. "If you were thinking of something to describe musically what was going on, what I chose was sometimes awfully far removed, but then it still worked somehow. I can't quite explain how I made my choices, except that I was using my instincts the whole way, and that's pretty much what I have to go by in all ways dealing with music." ■

'Jazz on Film.' The West Coast premiere of "Buster and Bill" includes two separate showings: Sat/22 at 4 p.m. (*Sherlock Junior* and *The High Sign*) and 8 p.m. (*Go West* and *One Week*). Other jazz films in the "Pre-Festival Day at the Movies" include Michael Roemer's 1964 *Nothing but a Man* (with *Abbey Lincoln* and *Ivan Dixon*) at 2 p.m., Shirley Clarke's 1985 *Ornette: Made in America* at 6 p.m., and "Behop Legends" (a selection of classic performance clips presented by Mark Cantor) at 9:45 p.m. Castro Theatre, Castro at Market. Ticket prices vary. For information, call (415) 788-SFJF.