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By [Rick Koster](#), Day Arts Writer

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Angel might be the centerfold, but '30s-era jazz guitarist Charlie Christian would certainly be the cover image of any musical encyclopedia as envisioned by J. Geils.

As titular head of the multi-platinum, Boston-based J. Geils Band, the guitarist Geils spent years playing the rock 'n' roll stage fueled by such hits as "Freeze Frame," "Love Stinks," "Give It To Me," "(Ain't Nothin' But A) House Party" and, yes, the MTV-happy "Centerfold."

While he certainly enjoyed his rock star years, more recent musical excursions have focused on his first love — jazz and swing guitar, the sort typified by Christian and other luminaries like Django Reinhardt and Bob Dunn. Geils' frequent cohorts on these latter-day experiments are such pals as Duke Robillard and Gerry Beaudoin.

"I've actually been a big fan of jazz since I was a kid in New Jersey," Geils, 62, says, speaking by phone from his Boston home. "There was always music around our house and my dad took me to see Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Dizzie Gillespie, Count Basie, Duke Ellington ... Ultimately, I got into blues and folk music in college, and then the J. Geils Band and the rock thing, but I always wanted to get back to jazz."

Geils' and Beaudoin's band, Kings of Strings, performs Friday in the Oasis Room at New London's Garde Arts Center. Focusing on and delighting in the swing, bebop and blues song book, the Kings of Swing will explore a wealth of music as typified by their 2006 "Kings of Strings" album and Geils' 2004 solo effort, "J. Geils Plays Jazz Guitar."

In fact, the J. Geils Band started out as an R&B-based party band inspired by such acts as the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and Charley Musselwhite's South Side Band. Formed by Geils, harpist Magic Dick and bassist Danny Klein while still students at Worcester Tech, the J. Geils Band moved to Boston and earned a reputation as a ripping live act.

They specialized in raucous covers of obscure blues and R&B material. "(Vocalist Peter) Wolf had a pretty big record collection and we'd just pick something that sounded good that no one had heard. Or we'd study old blues records and say, 'Who's this guy McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters) or this guy Chester Arthur Burnet (Howlin' Wolf).'"

Geils says the band's evolution happened in the typical context of the music business. "We had a 13- or 14-year run and over time there was just this very subtle transition," Geils says. "We went from those first albums, which reflected our genuine interests, to something different. The name of the game in the industry became to have hit records and pressure from the labels. After a while, you realize you're in show business and it's not necessarily the same thing."

After the band broke up, Geils laid low for a few years and gradually began playing material closer to the heart. He released two blues albums for Rounder, then hooked up with Beaudoin and Robillard just for fun.

"They're close friends and we just have a blast," Geils says. "Duke and I are totally self-taught and from the same blues base whereas Gerry not only knows more chords than Duke and I put together — he knows the names of them!"

While the trio has played several dates together, a recording has yet to happen. "It's tough to get Duke in the studio because he's such a road guy," Geils says. "He'll go to Istanbul for one gig if you want him to play. So we've got to get a break in his schedule, but a record with all of us would be fun."

Geils has his second solo jazz recording in the can and hopes to have it released sometime this summer. In the meantime, he and Beaudoin are enjoying their work with the Kings of Strings. "We never have any idea what we might play," he says of the Garde show. "I spent far too many years in rock 'n' roll to play the same set list or solos. You never know what might happen."

Geils says it's been a long run to get back where he started, but he wouldn't change a thing. He says, "I remember being 11 and seeing Louis Armstrong in a high school auditorium. They were so great. And I just looked up at him on stage and I said, 'That's what I want to do.'"

Kings of Strings, 8 p.m. Friday, Garde Arts Center Oasis Room, 325 State St., New London; \$60; 444-7373, www.gardearts.org.

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! J. Geils, left, joins Gerry Beaudoin and the rest of the Kings of Strings Friday at the Garde Arts Center in New London.