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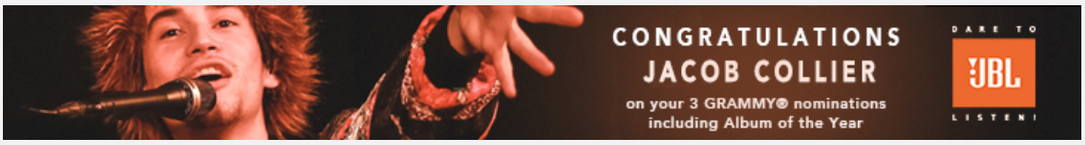

Kurt Rosenwinkel: A Whole New Vista

The Brazilian-influenced *Caipi* marks exciting, unexpected new directions for the influential guitarist

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

Kurt Rosenwinkel (photo by Osamu Kurihara)

There's something at once disarming and immediately gripping about *Caipi*, the newest release by guitarist and composer Kurt Rosenwinkel.

In what is probably the boldest departure of his nearly three-decade-long career, Rosenwinkel sings full-blown lyric songs, plays nearly every instrument on the record and creates a vivid panorama of sound, with hard-driving, Brazilian-tinged beats propelling one infectious melody after another. Rosenwinkel recently retired from teaching at the Jazz-Institut Berlin in order to bring *Caipi* to fruition and devote himself entirely to performing and recording again.

The live-band incarnation of *Caipi* played Birdland in New York for a week in mid-March. This is a young and brand-new lineup hailing from Brazil and Germany, not the established New York heavyweights Rosenwinkel has appeared with in his trios, quartets and quintets over the years. But the *Caipi* band is no less brilliant: At Birdland the melodies soared, the arrangements were airtight and practically everyone in the group sang, creating a lush, enveloping aesthetic.

Rosenwinkel, 46, who rose up in the 1990s as perhaps the most technically gifted and influential guitarist of his generation, has kept many key elements of his musical identity in place: complex and mysterious harmony; beautiful single-note tone and virtuosic line playing informed by postbop and fusion; pedal effects and sound-processing that carries over in part from his work on recordings such as *Heartcore* and *Star of Jupiter*. Yet *Caipi* represents a shift in musical priorities and the start of a new chapter. We caught up with him during off-hours in the club, to chat about the album and his ongoing evolution.

You've said that Caipi took 10 years to make. How did the process play out? You did it in the midst of teaching in Berlin and pursuing other projects.

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Maybe that's why it took 10 years [*laughs*]. When I would have the chance at home I would go down and enjoy that kind of free-roaming creative space.

When you say "go down," you mean into your home studio, Heartcore Studios?

Yeah, it's in my home in Berlin.

Did you build the studio with help?

No, I did it myself. I've been working on and studying recording technique since 1995. Well, actually, I started recording with my friend in 1983, with a Tascam Portastudio four-track cassette machine. I love being able to make a concrete version of a song in the comfortable creative utopia of home. That's something I've been developing since then. With the advent of professional home-recording equipment in the mid-'90s, that's when I first made the transition from just doing shitty demos to doing real stuff. I made *Heartcore* like that.

Heartcore was before you moved to Germany, right?

Yeah, that was in Brooklyn, around 2001 to 2003. It was a really small space in my Brooklyn apartment. I've been doing these home recordings all through the years, and occasionally it becomes something definite. And I started to realize that this new genre within my own musical universe was an actual distinct body of songs that I started to call *Caipi*, because they had something to do with Brazilian influences.

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Is there a translation of that term?

"Caipi" is what Berliners call a *caipirinha* [Brazil's national cocktail]. In the summer the Berliners are all sunbathing, because the city is totally dark and overcast for most of the year. When the sun comes out everybody is just sunbathing, wherever there's any little patch of grass; even on the sidewalk, there's somebody sunbathing and drinking a "caipi." And so to me, the term "caipi" refers to that—my love of Brazilian music, but also something that's not authentically Brazilian. It's my love from afar, through the prism of my experience, and very much a part of my own world where I am. People in Brazil don't know what you mean when you say "caipi."

You're playing nearly all the instruments on the album. Tell us about the evolution of that.

When I was growing up, I played a lot with my best friend, Gordon. He lived across the street and he played drums. I would go over there and play his drums and play the bass, since it was just the two of us. And I was also playing piano, my first instrument. So I've played bass, drums and piano since I was about 9, and I started guitar at 12.

You've never quite highlighted your multi-instrumental capabilities this fully.

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Heartcore was really the first, but I've always been recording on those instruments for my stuff at home. Most of the time that doesn't make it to the albums, but *Heartcore* was the first time I took that inner world and brought it out. So *Caipi* is another blossoming of that, a cocoon-and-then-butterfly-type deal.

You've always had a vocal element in your music, but now you're singing full songs, both in the studio and live. The technical challenge of singing on tour must be significant.

I love it. It's a whole new vista to improve on. It's fun to be a beginner, because you can get better really quick. I have a vocal coach now, so she's been giving me a great foundation. I'm gargling, doing all kinds of weird stuff—blowing bubbles, blowing up balloons, finding my diaphragm, learning a lot about it. I'm determined. It's cool to have a new barrier to break through.

Another big departure is Heartcore Records, your new label, which I understand is a joint venture with bassist Avishai Cohen's Razdaz Recordz.

My manager and I parted ways after working together for 14 years with great success. I became a free agent, went to some major labels and got a very good response, but ultimately realized I didn't want to have to fit into someone else's aesthetic. I wanted to do something more exciting and more appropriate to where I feel like I am in my life right now, and to do something more for music in general—to create a label that can feature other artists and foster talent that I would like to develop.

And also to implement something that would be a new brand. I felt like it was a good time, counter-intuitively the best time, to start a new brand in a completely desolated music-industry landscape. That's the perfect time to be like a beacon of light. So in the middle of one night I woke up and went out to the balcony at my girlfriend's parents' house in Bonn, and I looked at the moon and I was like, "Holy shit, I have to start my own label." I had never thought of it before then. I love games; I've been a gamer all my life. I love to figure out how to succeed in a world with certain parameters, and that's kind of like a metaphor for having your own business.

You say you want to release other artists. Are there specific ones in mind?

Yeah. We're starting out slow. We teamed up with Razdaz because I was working as a sideman in Avishai's group and I saw his whole apparatus and I was very impressed with how they function. Of course Razdaz was created in order to release Avishai's music, but he just got signed to Sony. That left a space for their attention, and I asked if they'd be interested in doing a sub-label deal. So we're really doing it full-on. We want to put out two or three records a year. I've already signed several artists, and the next record will be by [*Caipi* multi-instrumentalist and singer] Pedro Martins.

That's a good segue to this live band you've formed for *Caipi*. The "creative utopia" of your home studio is one thing, but the demands of this music on the bandstand must be very different.

Absolutely. I was determined from the outset to do it right. Finding band members is always an intuitive process, a deep meditation upon people's energies and skills. I honestly feel like it was a karmic destiny. All these players were my first choices. I flew everybody to Berlin in July 2016, and we had a week of rehearsals at my house without any gig, so no pressure. Everybody came already knowing everything, so it was amazing. On her own, [pianist] Olivia [Trummer] wrote out all the charts. Oh my God, I just had chicken scratch and fragments of this and that, so I said, "I don't really have charts for these," and she was like, "Oh, I have them all transcribed. Here you go." Yes! Yes!

Everybody just brings their full spirit and humor and humanity, and we bonded right away as a group, as a family. I was cooking for everybody, every day. We did that week in July and came back for another week in October and then we started playing live.

How about Eric Clapton's guest solo on "Little Dream"? I know he came to hear you at the Village Vanguard and then invited you to play at Madison Square Garden, in 2013, as part of his Crossroads Guitar Festival. You've really developed a friendship.

It's such a huge thrill to have a relationship with Eric, and he's been so supportive. We were mixing the album in London with Paul Stacey, and I called up Clapton and asked him if he wanted to come through the studio just to visit. So he did and we hung out for a minute. And it occurred to me then, I asked, "Would you mind just playing one note on the album? Just to manifest the fact that you're a part of it?" All through the years I've known him he's seen the album develop, and he's been really positive and encouraging of my struggle to move it forward. And ultimately he helped with the label and getting the album finished.

Did you just happen to be working on that song, or did you know that song was the one for him?

No, we just happened to be working on that song. I said, "Do you want to throw down a solo?" He's like, "What key is it in?" I said, "A minor!" It was in 7/4, and he just did his thing and it was so beautiful, so subtle. The vibe is immediate when he starts playing. It's a modest cameo but it's so meaningful.

Tell us about some of the other songs. "Little B," dedicated to your older son, Silas, for instance—is there a relation to the song "Chromatic B"?

Yes, the letter "B" [*laughs*]! It's been really funny for me with these titles, because as Chris Weisman mentions in the liner notes, they're like working titles that ended up being the actual titles. There's all kinds of relationships, like you have "Little Dream" and "Little B," you have "Chromatic B" and "Little B," you have "Kama" and "Ezra," you have "Casio Vanguard" and "Casio Escher." I really love that interplay between the titles of the tunes. "Chromatic B" is just chromatic and it's in B.

I was glad to hear "Ezra" on a record because I've heard you play it live for a while. It really makes sense as part of this project.

I almost didn't put it on but I'm glad I did.

Are there others that had a previous life on the bandstand with other groups?

Yes, "Little Dream" I've performed every once in a while, never to my satisfaction. I did a tour with the Polish singer Grażyna Auguścik—she sang it, there's a YouTube video of us playing it, and I like that version. I used to play "Kama" live, but I was never happy with that either. These songs are very specific, and it all relates to this band.

Yes, it's interesting how you referred to it as a "genre" of songs within your songbook.

Yeah, you almost need a different band for different genres.

While there's a strong Brazilian influence on *Caipi*, your distinct harmonic imprint is equally strong.

Yeah, when the songs started coming out I was surprised. I didn't intend for them to be any particular way. Which is what I love about being in that open creative space, because you don't have a deadline, you don't have any description of what you have to do—it's just free. I never set out to make a Brazilian-type album, but these songs just started to come and I was like, "Oh, wow." And there's also rock influences in there. I love '80s music, synthpop. There's some of that—the Smiths, the Cure, British rock. A lot of different aspects.

You really went all the way with the Brazilian sound in terms of the Portuguese lyrics, among other things. And then it changes to English mostly for the second half. How did that come about? Did [vocalist] Amanda Brecker [daughter of Randy Brecker and Eliane Elias] write her lyrics in Portuguese?

Yes, for "Kama" and "Little B." And she wrote lyrics for other songs that became wordless. Lyrics became one of the big questions as the music matured. That was the last piece of the puzzle—lyrics and vocals. The English lyrics I wrote; they were already there. But "Kama" had been in existence for 10 years without any lyrics, with just my wordless vocals. I've put some songs on records that are just at the underlying step before a song would become a lyric song. There's something about the undercurrent of the impulse for language, like "The Polish Song" [from *The Enemies of Energy*, recorded in 1996].

Like Chris writes in the album's liner notes about your "falsetto alien language." It feels like you're trying to create a world with lyrics that aren't even lyrics.

Yeah. This record marks a breakthrough in that regard. It translates over to the actual lyric world, and I feel that's a new level for me.

You mean something specific that you want to express in words?

Yes. That said, I've always had lyric songs from time to time in this creative personal realm. Sometimes a rock song will come out and I'll complete it. I have a whole album of other songs that are finished. It's a rock album. That's going to be my next album. Some of the songs you heard in the live show, they're not on *Caipi*. One is called "All Is Well." So there's a whole album of songs like that coming up next.

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Read David R. Adler's 2005 profile of Rosenwinkel in *JazzTimes*.

Watch Rosenwinkel discuss and play his D'Angelico signature model guitar. *Originally Published August 21, 2017*

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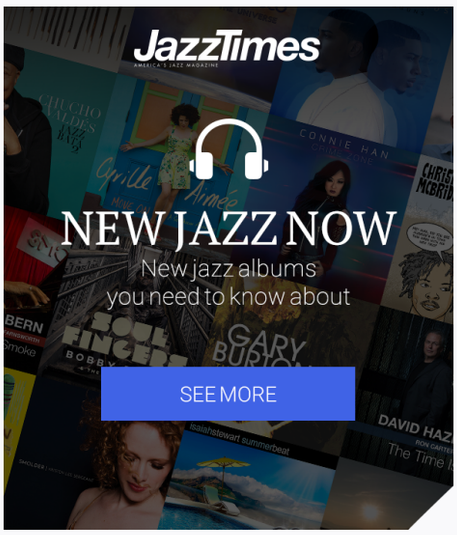

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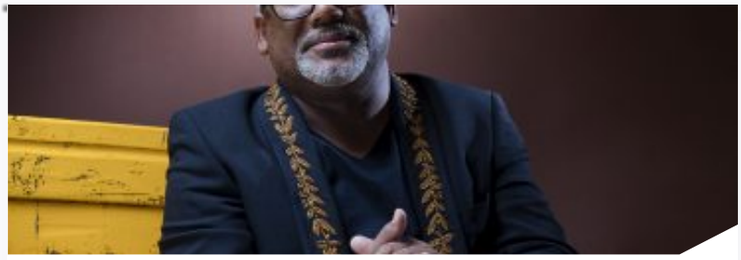

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