



GOING DEEP

By David Adler

PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN GITTLER

**Guitarist Kurt
Rosenwinkel
advances his
art in the
midst of major
life changes.**

Several years ago, on a perfectly cloudless afternoon, I stood on a Manhattan sidewalk during a partial solar eclipse.

We usually think of an eclipse as a shroud of darkness, but on this day the sun remained bright, if slightly dulled, and the shadows appeared dappled and distorted. Everywhere there were reassuringly familiar scenes and guideposts, but they were cloaked in mystery.

Kurt Rosenwinkel's music strikes the ear in a similar way. It is unmistakably a part of the known jazz universe, but it is also a world of obscure shadows, with a beguiling eccentricity that no one but Rosenwinkel could have conceived.

Leading a quintet at the Village Vanguard in early April, Rosenwinkel was a picture of complete creative immersion—"his eyes wide open under closed lids," as Mitch Borden, owner of the nearby club Smalls, wrote in the liner notes to the guitarist's 2001 album *The Next Step*.

Ostensibly, the six-night Vanguard engagement heralded the release of Rosenwinkel's fourth Verve CD, *Deep Song*. But on opening night, little from the new album was heard. Instead, Rosenwinkel reached back to include songs as old as "East Coast Love Affair," the title track from his 1996 Fresh Sound New Talent debut. He also showcased a number of pieces he has yet to record. The journey was gripping, and the power and coherence of Rosenwinkel's growing body of work was never clearer.

Deep Song is Rosenwinkel's first Verve release not to feature his saxophonic alter ego, Mark Turner. "Mark and I had been on slightly different trajectories," Rosenwinkel says. His working quartet with Turner, bassist Ben Street and drummer Jeff Ballard—the lineup from *The Next Step*—had fallen by the wayside. Rosenwinkel had begun using a pianist (usually Ethan Iverson of Bad Plus fame) instead of a horn player. "My feeling as a bandleader was that everything was open, that I didn't have a particular band." It was the perfect time, therefore, to convene a group of esteemed and well-acquainted peers who'd been eager to work together on a more sustained level.

Rosenwinkel hired tenor saxophonist Joshua Redman, pianist Brad Mehldau and bassist Larry Grenadier (who plays with Turner and Ballard in the trio FLY and is also a longtime member of Mehldau's trio). Ballard yields his chair to the fiery Ali Jackson on six of *Deep Song*'s 10 tracks. The new lineup played the European festival circuit in 2004 and was well-oiled when it came time to record. "It was the most fun in the studio I've ever had," Rosenwinkel declares. "If we messed something up, I was elated just to play the tune again."

Along with such new pieces as "The Cloister," "Brooklyn Sometimes" and "Gesture (Lester)," *Deep Song* includes reworked versions of three older tunes:

"Synthetics," "Use of Light" and "The Next Step." Rosenwinkel wrote some of this earlier material in an altered guitar tuning that he's since abandoned. To adapt the music for standard tuning, he had to learn it "as if it was someone else's."

Turner and Ballard were back in force for the Vanguard shows, however, with Aaron Goldberg on piano and Joe Martin on bass. "Joe is one of the heavy bass players," says Rosenwinkel, whose rapport with Martin in a bebop setting can be heard on the guitarist's Criss Cross release, *Intuit* (1999). Goldberg, with his swinging, expansive palette, gave new life to tunes like "Dream of the Old" and "Hope and Fear" from Rosenwinkel's 2000 disc *The Enemies of Energy*. The band also dealt with Turner's labyrinthine music, including "Myron's World" and "Jacky's Place" from the *Dharma Days* album (Turner's last for Warner Bros.). Turner began "Myron's World" alone, his long, stark tones morphing into grand spirals of sound. Then Rosenwinkel joined in, proposing a whole new set of angles and deviations. It was some of the most alert, unorthodox duo playing in recent memory. But this can be expected from one of the freshest instrumental pairings in jazz today. "Sometimes it's like playing with one guy who has twice the power," Goldberg says of the Turner-Rosenwinkel front line.

Conspicuously absent that night was any music from 2003's *Heartcore*, Rosenwinkel's beat-oriented, computer-aided project produced by rapper Q-Tip. Not that the album's music can't be performed live: Rosenwinkel took a *Heartcore* band on the road, and even played the new album's "Brooklyn Sometimes" with that very different configuration. "Making *Heartcore* was like getting into the innards of the machine with wrenches and stuff," says Rosenwinkel, contorting his limbs in every direction. "Manipulating it to convey some soul, you know? And it was not so malleable. I really had to struggle to make it expressive. After that, I wanted to get back to playing the guitar. There's so much fertile soil there. Striking out new ground is its own adventure, but there's something about coming back home, and you have your garden that's blooming."

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Still, there is another *Heartcore*-like project in Rosenwinkel's future. "I'm already gearing up for it, literally," he says, almost cackling. "I'm getting new wrenches, an array of different types of pipes...." He also plans to launch a new ensemble with flugelhorn, tenor sax, cello, bass and drums. "I'll play guitar and piano," he says. "A composer's band."

On a recent trip to Amsterdam, Rosenwinkel became intrigued by another possibility. "I was invited to play with the Concertbegouw big band," he recalls. "They arranged some of my songs and asked me to play with them. I showed up for the rehearsal and it was a revelation. I walked in at nine in the morning and they were playing the fuck out of 'Filters.' I couldn't believe it! It was just impeccable. It sparked my imagination. At a certain point I want to do a big-band project. I've never really dealt with orchestration in a traditional sense."



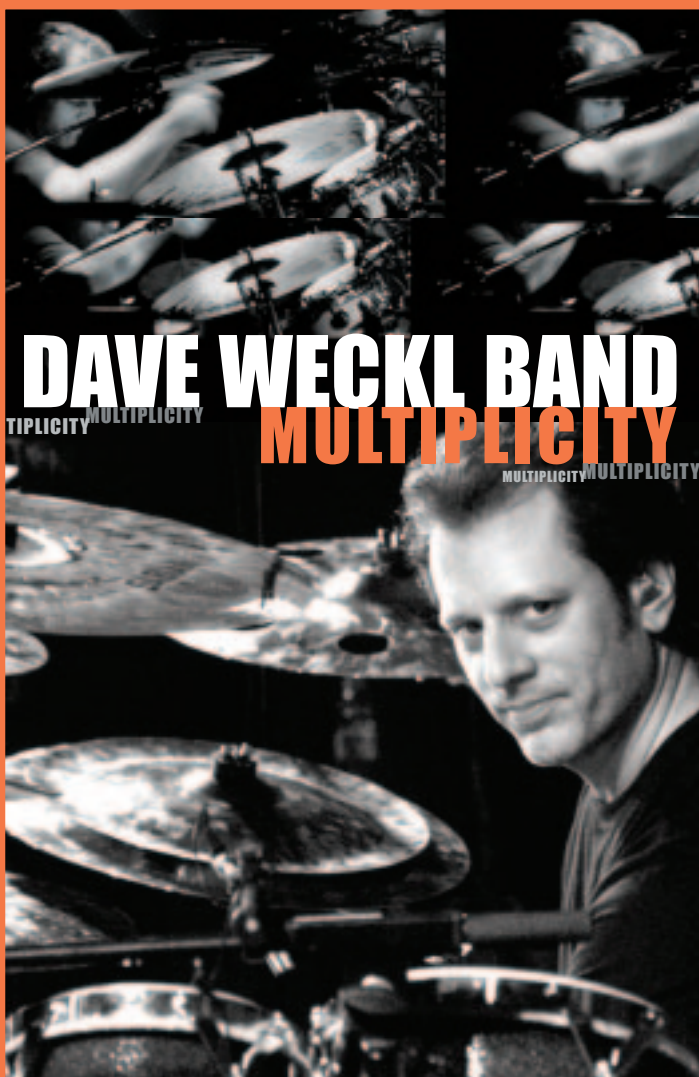
a lot of this work has been documented. On the Fresh Sound label alone, Rosenwinkel's sideman contributions include discs by Seamus Blake, Chris Cheek, George Colligan, Eli Degibri, Matt Penman, Kris Bauman, Phil Grenadier and others. He's also appeared on nearly every Mark Turner record, on the Brian Blade Fellowship's *Perceptual*, on the Matthias Lupri Group's *Same Time Twice* and alongside Gary Bartz on pianist Barney McAll's 2001 debut, *Release the Day*. Other credits include Chris Potter's *Vertigo*, Danilo Perez's *Motherland* and albums by Paul Motian's Electric Bebop Band and the avant-garde group Human Feel. Rosenwinkel's career is still quite young, but his footprint is already substantial. His move abroad can't change that.

On guitar, Rosenwinkel has come to be just as identifiable as Pat Metheny, Bill Frisell or any of the modern-school guitarists with whom he's usually compared. His sound is "wet"—drenched in reverb and delay—but he modifies the amount of delay with an expression pedal as the music progresses. This can create a kind of "swallowed" attack in his single-note lines, or a lofty, oceanic feeling in his arpeggios and chords. His scalar vocabulary, like Mark Turner's, is probing and advanced, and his

In 2003 Rosenwinkel took leave of New York and moved with his wife, Rebecca, to her hometown of Zurich, Switzerland. In late April 2004 their first child, Silas, was born. (Rosenwinkel was tickled that his one tour date in Zurich happened to fall on his son's birthday.) He's impressed by the quality of life in Zurich—and it's only now, he says, that he understands what "quality of life" means. He insists that his professional life hasn't changed a great deal, and playing extensively in Europe is not new to him. He still journeys back to the U.S. for gigs roughly three or four times a year. "I'm not part of a local music community anymore, and I miss that," he concedes. "I'm focusing more on the solitary pursuits of music like practicing and composing."

In New York, he is sorely missed. Rosenwinkel had become a pillar of the city's jazz scene, forging relationships with an impressive roster of players. Fortunately,





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articulation, while often remarkably fluid, is idiosyncratic and rough around the edges. There's no mistaking it.

Another distinguishing aspect to Rosenwinkel's sound is his vocalizing. Jazz musicians often sing when they improvise, but Rosenwinkel has integrated this practice in a unique way, going so far as to amplify his voice on the bandstand and in the studio. (He's taken to using a lapel mike for this purpose.) His vocal approach has nothing in common with scat singing. It is a nonsyllabic falsetto, a beckoning and mystical *solfege*, barely audible at times. When it does peek through the mix, its accuracy is often astounding. But it serves more than a mere doubling function, as Rosenwinkel explains: "I can bring out an inner voice of a chord, and I can emphasize it even after I've played the chord. With my voice I can manipulate the balance of the notes. It's like my sixth finger."

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Rosenwinkel's compositions, even at their most circuitous, tend to orbit around a central melodic idea, one that lingers after the music ends. "Everything has to have a confirming release, in whatever way," Rosenwinkel says. "Every great piece of music I've heard has that quality. At some point the skies have to open up." Aaron Goldberg contends, "Even if we play something like 'Turns' or 'Synthetics,' the vocal quality of Kurt's sound makes the whole thing sing to most listeners. It never loses its human quality, no matter how complex or theoretical it gets."

His harmonic palette, too, is distinctive, and it reflects his broad listening habits. "Sometimes maybe just one moment of one song influences me a lot," Rosenwinkel says. "'Central Park in the Dark' by Charles Ives had a huge influence on me. Ravel. 'Five Pieces for Orchestra' by Schoenberg."

Has Rosenwinkel studied this music on paper?

"No," he says, flatly. "It's a quality in the ear." He admires the work of Jay Dee, the Detroit hip-hop producer, enough to provide a link to it from his Web site. "The way Jay Dee sparks my ear is similar to the Charles Ives piece," he says. Another name that sets him off is Allan Holdsworth. "Man, I love his music! To me, he's the only guitarist dealing with the kind of language Coltrane was dealing with—those long Slonimsky patterns that evolve differently through different registers in a very precise way, but pure like a prism. That's a big part of what I hear, that clarity of harmonic unfolding and melodic intricacy."

In his notes to *The Enemies of Energy*, Rosenwinkel asserts "cadence is physical." When reminded of this, he laughs, but as he explains the remark, he enters another space. "Cadence isn't even really something I hear—it's something I feel, a progression from

one physical state to another. That shift is a feeling in my chest. When I'm writing or playing, I have to concentrate so deeply on that shift in order to will it out of my physical being." His eyes are nearly closed as he speaks, and his face takes on the faraway look that it usually does onstage. "There have been many moments in my life where the connection was complete, and immediately I disappeared, and it was just the connection. Something took over and I was just looking at my hands playing things, as an observer, seeing spirits dancing on the piano, expressing these forms and shapes that were just coming through."

Aaron Goldberg refers to this degree of inspiration as "music with a capital 'M.'" But the thing to remember, Goldberg adds: "There is no small 'm' music with Kurt." Even soundchecks are occasions to court the dancing spirits. "It's almost like the spirit world needs incarnated beings to lend them your physicality, so that they can experience the beauty of life through you," Rosenwinkel says. "That's my orientation as a musician: to refine what I can refine on my level, so I can offer it up. Hopefully if the spirit wants to come and experience anything, I can let myself disappear so it can take over."

But surely this level of engagement, this "disappearance," can't be summoned at will. Rosenwinkel immediately agrees. "You can't go banging on the door to music," he says. "You have to just go to the door. But you can't make any demands. In the beginning, I felt the music was good only if that connection happened. But you learn that you can't rely on that. The only relationship you can ever have to that is humility. The work you can do is to become more consistent, to work on your music as craft."

In other words, focus on earthly matters, but seek what lies beyond. Speaking slowly and gesturing with his arms, Rosenwinkel concludes: "My visualization of music is like this comet, flying through the universe. If a musician can meditate deeply enough, they can pull themselves off the planet and position themselves at a certain point up into space. And then that comet can come around and just take them up." **JT**

Listening Pleasures

Busta Rhymes, *Anarchy and When Disaster Strikes*
Art Tatum, *Solo Masterpieces*
Duke Ellington, *Far East Suite*
Miles Davis, *Cookin' at the Plugged Nickel*
John Coltrane, *Coltrane's Sound*
Radiohead, "Scatterbrain," from *Hail to the Thief*
Richard Strauss, *Four Last Songs*
Led Zeppelin, *Houses of the Holy*
The Police, *Synchronicity*
Bud Powell
Erik Satie

Gearbox

Guitar: D'Angelico New Yorker NYSS-3
Strings: D'Addario .13s
Amp: Polytone Minibrute 3
Effects: Line 6 delay modeler, Lexicon LXP-1
Vocal mike: Audio-Technica lavalier, Digttech vocal effects (reverb/delay)

WALTER BEASLEY



HUCD 3398

For Her is perhaps one of Beasley's most personal takes on record, a first-hand account of the mysterious arc of a romantic relationship, from heady beginning to bittersweet ending and hopeful aftermath. It's a universal phenomenon that invariably takes on a life of its own and never quite plays out the same way twice — a story that's sometimes smooth, sometimes rocky, but always adventurous.



HUCD 3098

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