

Artist Interview: Jonathan Kreisberg

By Gerald Miller

Born in New York City and raised in Miami, Jonathan Kreisberg took up guitar at the age of ten after hearing the first Van Halen album. He quickly developed an intense dedication to the instrument and won accolades while still in his teens, including features in *Guitar Player* and *DownBeat*. After graduating from the University of Miami, Jonathan returned to New York City in 1997 and has gone on to work with an extensive list of jazz greats while developing his unique gifts as an instrumentalist and composer. Jonathan shared some thoughts with *Guitar Sessions* on the eve of the September 2007 release of *The South of Everywhere*, his second Mel Bay CD and his sixth as a leader.

Jonathan, thanks for taking a few minutes for *Guitar Sessions*. First, let me say that everyone at Mel Bay has thoroughly enjoyed working with you. You set extremely high standards for yourself as a professional, sometimes bringing to mind a quote attributed to Leonardo da Vinci that "Art is never finished, only abandoned". How difficult is it for you to give a project your final stamp of approval?

Well, I guess for me making a recording is just like playing a show, but a bit more intense. It's important for me to communicate with the audience, so I want to play my best but also have the sound convey a feeling. So I guess there is a "letting go," because I leave a part of me with every project. I'd prefer to call it cutting the umbilical cord and sending it out into the world. I can't really bear to think of it as abandoning it.

The interplay between highly skilled musicians sometimes appears almost telepathic, and your groups are certainly no exception. What can you share with us about the chemistry you've experienced on the new CD and other projects?

Well, the guys on this disc are people that I feel I get along with great musically and otherwise. They also have such great ears, so we definitely have some great telepathic moments. I love the way Mark and Gary synch up on the end of "Altered Ego". That cracks me up.

Do you believe a certain level of tension is necessary in the creative process?

In my experience it helps. I mean, music itself on the basic level is really about tension and release. Melodies, harmonies and rhythms all are built on it.

In musical settings, do you typically see yourself as a stabilizing influence or more of a wildcard?

That's an interesting question. I never really thought of it that way, but I guess I'm usually a wildcard. It depends on what I feel the music needs at that moment. Most of my favorite players can probably switch from stable to wildcard at the drop of a dime.

Frank Zappa reportedly once said that "Sometimes, when you can't find a chord ugly enough to say what you want to say, you have to rely on a toy giraffe filled with whipped cream." How do you push the envelope?

Man that's a great quote! Well, Zappa was a great example of a guy who REALLY wanted to communicate with music. I mean, he wanted to go beyond what was thought to

be possible with the art form. He was combining elements from EVERYTHING into a musical circus of sorts. I really admire him for that, but my stuff is a bit more specific and subtle, I guess. That being said, sometimes I get to a point where I want to smash a Jell-O-filled elephant into my guitar.

For you, is composing music primarily a structured process or more of an organic experience?

Primarily it's organic, but I draw from structured ideas for inspiration.

Are you capable of not writing music at this point? Does it simply flow, to some extent?

I once read that Aaron Copland claimed that great composers don't wait for inspiration; they just get up everyday and compose, work through the good and bad until it's great. I love that concept, and when I get into a certain headspace where I'm really focused on writing, I can be pretty prolific. But the truth is, I'm also a jazz guitar player. The craft of playing jazz and the guitar can really demand attention sometimes, and I tend to take a break from writing in those periods.

Tell us about your first compositions. What's the earliest original tune you still perform?

Well, the oldest have been retired, but I wrote "New for Now" about eight years ago, so I guess it's not really new anymore. It's still just such a fun tune to open a set with!

What's the longest period of time you've worked on a particular piece?

"Altered Ego", from *The South of Everywhere*, took a while and had a few versions- off and on for about a year. So did the title track from *Unearth*.

Who was your first audience? Do you remember what you played for them?

I played a Bach piece for my junior high school. I was so nervous that I played way too fast and it ended up sounding like a banjo jamboree.

Tell us about your guitar.

Still my Gibson 175, purchased from someone who was leaving the country in a hurry 15 years ago. I've worn most of the paint off of the back of the neck by now.

Do you play any instruments other than guitar?

I just got a piano! So I'm having some fun with that, but there won't be any Carnegie Hall concerts for another 40 years.

What's your dream gig?

I mean, I really feel that I'm playing with the guys that are just right for my music. That's why I feel that *The South of Everywhere* is kinda a dream gig really although, of course, there are a bunch of my heroes that I'd love to do some playing with. Most don't really use guitar, but one can humbly dream. Wayne Shorter would be at the top of the list most likely.

Upcoming performance dates, travels, workshops?

After the release of *The South of Everywhere*, I'll be traveling to Finland, Italy, Spain, Germany and Japan as well as performing some U.S. shows. I'll also be playing some big band versions of material from *Unearth* and *The South of Everywhere* in concerts with a couple university bands. So that should be fun. Also, I'll be doing some touring to support a couple new records I did as a sideman with vibraphonist Joe Locke and drummer Ari Hoenig. So it looks like it's going to be a busy year; I hope to find the time to write some new tunes!

Thanks for your time, Jonathan, and many thanks for the outstanding new CD.

To learn more about Jonathan Kreisberg and his music please visit:

www.jonathankreisberg.com