

The Versatile Guitar of Kevin Van Sant

By John Huntley



Kevin and Ben Palmer of The Van Sant/Palmer Duo

It's a midsummer evening in Durham, North Carolina, and although the sun has lost some of its overbearing heat, the humidity is still thick and enveloping. Through the swelter, people stroll slowly, sipping bottled water, carrying shopping bags, in no hurry, their steps weighted down in the heat. Almost imperceptively, your ears begin hearing the music. The sound emanates from a cavernous outdoor space of encircled brick-walled shops. Someone, it seems, has made the unexpectedly refreshing decision to hire a jazz quartet to entertain the passersby—solid jazz, in the open air, for everyone to hear. Each tune grabs more ears, more faces appear, and all for this straight-ahead, cooking jazz.

So it was the first time I saw guitarist Kevin Van Sant perform. On that night it was with his quartet featuring guitar, saxophone, bass and drums. Trading 'eights' with the sax player, Kevin transitions effortlessly between subtle, thoughtful comping and driving, complex solo lines. He's a tall man who sways slightly to the rhythm as he plays, seemingly lost in concentration. Immediately, you sense the musical confidence his playing exudes. On further listening, Kevin's technique and creativity never disappoint.

Born in Princeton, New Jersey, Kevin came to music early. His mother was a trained singer who participated in semi-professional opera and Broadway musicals when Kevin was a child, and he remembers her practicing in the house. "Looking back, I do think my early exposure to musicals helped develop my appreciation for the story-telling quality of music. I think having the dramatic context to those songs gave me a more emotional reaction to music. It may be why I'm a sucker for ballads." Kevin took the obligatory childhood piano lessons, but the instrument never caught his imagination as the guitar later would. After three years living in Jakarta, Indonesia, his family relocated to Chapel Hill, North Carolina—the area he still calls home.

Like so many people of his generation (he's 40), Kevin was drawn to the guitar as a teenager, spending long hours listening to and learning the solos of rock guitar heroes like Eric Clapton, Carlos Santana, and Jimi Hendrix. "I played a ton of hours at home alone before playing with anyone else," Kevin chuckles. Importantly, his musical ears didn't stop there. Around this time he stumbled upon a Concord label jazz sampler tape and his musical curiosity was piqued. "It contained all the great guitar players of that generation who were with Concord—Kenny Burrell, Herb Ellis, Howard Roberts, Laurindo Almeida, Remo Palmieri, Barney Kessel," Kevin remembers. "I think what struck me most, at first, was the sound of the big jazz guitars. Through the years I would come back to that tape and always get something new out of it. I'd start to understand more and more of what I was hearing, and began to imagine what their hands were doing on the guitar neck. I think my interest in big-sounding jazz chords probably originated from hearing the players on that sampler." From there, he started playing in his high school jazz band and jamming with local friends.

In the mid-nineties, Kevin co-founded J'Azure—a guitar, bass and sax trio. Although a fulltime working band for less than five years, they played gigs in not only the United States, but Russia, Spain, Holland and Switzerland, and released two CDs. It was with J'Azure that Kevin first played at the Montreux Jazz Festival, appearing in 1998 and 1999—a relationship that would yield Kevin three more trips to the prestigious venue. But it was the musical exploration that Kevin sites as one of his favorite memories of the group. "J'Azure was a very collaborative band which played many originals as well as jazz standards," Kevin

recalls. "One guy would bring in an idea and we'd all play through it and work out parts. I really enjoyed working in a trio because it gave me lots of room for the guitar, and really let me use the orchestral nature of the instrument," he remembers.

Although he has a natural talent, Kevin has worked hard to become the all-around jazz player that he is. "I remember reading in the liner notes of a Cal Collins album that Cal said he 'liked to play the whole box,' and I've always remembered that because the guitar can be such a versatile instrument. I'm self-taught, and everything I do derives from a chord-based concept, both in my harmonic organization and in how I have mapped out the fretboard," Kevin says. "When I was first learning tunes I found it much more satisfying to play a song in chord-melody style as opposed to the thin sound of unaccompanied single notes. Going through this process with hundreds of tunes forced me to learn voicings for every type of chord all over the neck, and in the course, revealed harmonic relationships. Just as importantly, it taught me how to always connect chords with a melodic thread." Learning through this process also brought advantageous byproducts, Kevin adds. "During improvisation, by having melody always organized in the context of chord shapes, I find it easy to be aware of the harmonic role of every note I am playing. I feel this allows me to choose important notes in a phrase with more purpose than I could with a linear scale-type of approach."

Like most working musicians, Kevin has always made a habit of having several projects going. As the status of J'Azure became more fluid, Kevin picked up gigs and side work to fill his calendar. One highlight was his work with veteran saxophonist, Frank Corbi, which eventually produced three CDs. "Frank is both an amazing player and an inspiration as a person," Kevin says. "Even after playing for sixty to seventy years Frank still reaches for new ideas. He is always melodic first and foremost, but he also has a lot of humor and adventure in his playing. I sometimes think of him as a cross between Stan Getz and Joe Henderson. Frank's attitude toward music and people will always serve as a role model for me. I feel very fortunate to have had the chance to be around Frank for the last 10 or so years," he concludes. Kevin has also worked gigs with saxophonist Blue Lou Marini, drummer Joe Chambers, trumpeter Ray Codrington, and vocalist Stephanie Nakasian.

Not a guitarist to leave a musical avenue unexplored, Kevin's entry into the jazz organ trio came next with his band, The Orgaphonics. "The organ trio is one of my favorite settings for jazz guitar," Kevin says. "It has such a driving, sonically fat sound that there's not a lot of big chording necessary. That lets me explore much more of the single line improvisation that other instrumentation settings don't." This led to the inevitable conversation about the influence of the great organ trios of the past. "Of course my role models include the great guitar/organ pairings of Kenny Burrell/Jimmy Smith, Grant Green/Larry Young, and Peter Bernstein/Larry Golding. And always Wes."

Kevin has a near-encyclopedic knowledge of jazz history, and his love of jazz guitar is ever-present. Name a jazz album and the chances are Kevin will recommend his favorite track. Name a jazz guitarist and Kevin will cite his favorite albums, solos, or lineups. This is a person who listens deeply to music. "Wes, Jim Hall, Joe Pass and Barney Kessel were always the ones that turned me on the most," he remembers. "You can learn such a huge amount from just listening to just those four. Take Barney Kessel-not only is there a technical brilliance, but his playing is so filled with joy." Kevin goes on to explain how much playing along to records helped his style mature. "Improvising lines along with records, I think, is extremely important for any aspiring jazz player. You are playing in a context of great time, the backdrop of what you are practicing with is dynamic, and you are constantly hearing the language in all its dialects and accents. Without even thinking about it, you absorb conventional song structures. You are creatively making music, as opposed to practicing things devoid of any musical context."

Kevin is also quick to point out that listening to other instruments is very important for any budding jazz guitarist. "As a guitar player trying to cop the feel of piano, sax, trumpet, or vibes solos, you are transcending your instrument and just dealing with musical ideas. When I'd play along with, say, Sonny Rollins's "Plus 4" I would try to emulate his type of phrasing and delivery during the solo; I wouldn't necessarily try to nail specific lines. I'd more just go for the flavor, which meant trying to play around with the short rhythmic figures he is known for, and capture some of the slurs common to saxophone players. Then Clifford Brown's solo comes in and suddenly it's a totally different feel and type of phrasing that I'm

trying to emulate,” Kevin remembers. “With every record it’s a whole new set of ideas to explore.

Eventually, through absorbing little pieces of all the different musical personalities, your own informed concept begins to emerge.”

While The Orgaphonics still gig as much as members scheduling allows, Kevin has recently released a CD with long-time musical partner, bassist Ben Palmer, which features Horace Silver compositions. “Silver was such a prolific composer. There was so much great material to draw from,” Kevin says. Entitled *Van Sant/Palmer Play the Music of Horace Silver*, the CD covers a wide range of material while highlighting some of Silver’s less-covered pieces. “Some of the most well-known tunes like “The Preacher” and “Songs for My Father” just didn’t translate that well to a guitar/bass duo setting, so we concentrated on the pieces that would fit into the tempo and feel of a duo,” Kevin says. “This led us to tunes that we might not have ever played before, but that we were harmonically drawn to.” Additionally, the duo has released two other CDs since 2001. “Ben and I have played together so much over the last 10 years and probably more often than not in a drum-less setting, which makes it very easy and comfortable for us to lock into a groove,” Kevin says. “That’s really the most important thing for any group of two or twenty; if you’ve got a comfortable pocket, it’s much easier to be relaxed and play creatively.”

In support of the new CD, Kevin and Ben recently returned from playing gigs in Germany. “We really enjoyed playing over there. We had good audiences and much support.” You can catch some videos from those gigs on Kevin’s site (see URL below). The video of Kevin’s original composition “Threes in Four” is especially cooking. Kevin says he enjoyed playing jam sessions with local musicians after the Van Sant/Palmer Duo sets. “One thing I really liked in Europe was these small club gigs where the featured band plays the first set as a concert and then it opens up for a jam session,” Kevin recalls. “I think on a local level this encourages guys to prepare some tunes and arrangements instead of just defaulting to the all too common pick-up band playing out of a Real Book.”

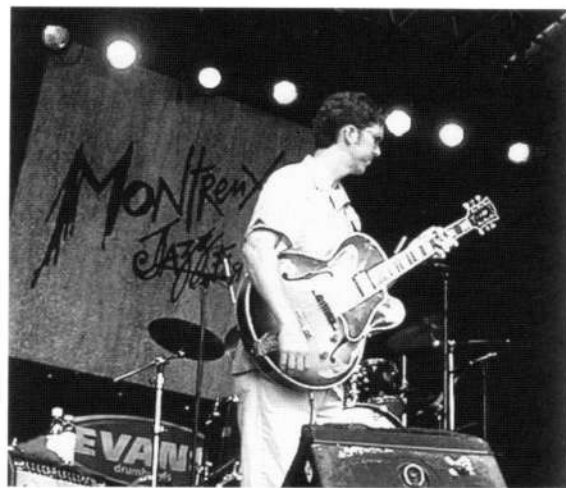
That sentiment is not surprising coming from Kevin as the joy of simply playing is so evident in his work. His style is firmly rooted in the great jazz guitar masters, but ably incorporates his own interpretations and

explorations. Coupled with his undeniable technical chops, Kevin’s playing is always adventurous, melodically challenging, and most of all, impossible to walk away from.

A Conversation with Kevin

JH: You’ve played in so many different musical combinations – duos, trios, quartet, and with such varied instrumentation. How do you approach playing in those different settings? Are there any favorite combinations for you as a guitarist or any that especially stretch your musical abilities?

Kevin: One of the things I love about jazz music is the variety of settings we as players find ourselves in. And in my view the guitar has more versatility than any other instrument, so we really have a lot of possibilities. If I had to choose one format, it would probably be the classic guitar/bass/drums trio. My preference is generally to be the only chordal instrument in the ensemble because of the freedom and openness. But there is also something liberating about having another harmonic instrument like piano or organ underneath you. I find I am able to “float” single note lines across the harmony more when I hear the strength of the chords clearly. If it’s just the guitar, my ears want me to describe the changes more implicitly, so I play a little differently. I’m grateful that I don’t have to choose just one configuration!



Kevin performs at the Montreux Jazz Festival

JH: Your main instrument is a 1997 Gibson Les Paul “Wes Montgomery” model. Tell us about that instrument and your other gear.

Kevin: I’ve had the L5 for about 10 years, and it’s perfect for me because I prefer a darker, warmer sound, and it just feels great in my hands. Many arch-

makers go for a louder and brighter acoustic tone. Those guitars tend not to amplify as warmly. "The Wes" is constructed in a way that is the best balance of acoustic and electric tone for me. I was able to do a lot of hands-on research prior to choosing the L5, so I really was very sure about what I wanted in a jazz guitar. For example, details such as a routed-in pickup versus a floating pickup and the neck scale length were both important considerations. I do also still have the first jazz guitar I owned, which is a Gibson ES175, and I have a Joe Beck Alto guitar, which uses an interesting tuning Joe came up with. I don't really have the collector mindset with guitars, though I do have a couple of other guitars that have somehow found their way into my practice room, such as an inexpensive nylon string guitar, and an Ibanez L5 knockoff, which I keep strung with very heavy strings and tuned down a fourth. But I play the "Wes" ninety-nine percent of the time.



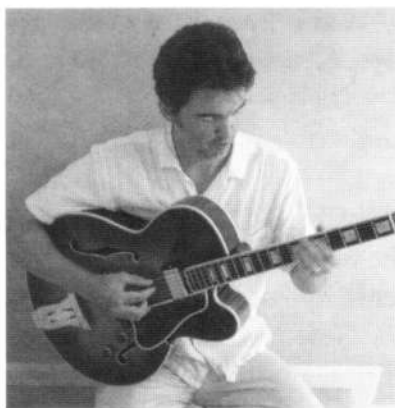
Kevin with Ben Palmer of The Van Sant/Palmer Duo

JH: And amps?

Kevin: For years I have used only Evans and Acoustic Image amplifiers. Both of which are, coincidentally, built here in North Carolina. Though, I recently bought the larger 15" model from Polytone that I've been using on some louder gigs.

JH: What's next for Kevin Van Sant?

Kevin: The main thing is to continue to find a way to make this work and feel like I'm always making progress. Specifically, this means continuing to look for opportunities to travel, to develop the playing I do



locally, and to try to keep coming up with ways to take advantage of the Internet as a means of reaching a potentially infinite audience directly. I also have a couple of recording projects either already in the works or in the

planning stages. I'm feeling motivated to do more with the organ group right now. So one of the ideas I have for my next CD might manifest with that group. Aside from those tangible things I'm always trying to get closer to sounding like that guitar player I hear in my head. I like the way he plays.

You can find Kevin's CDs and videos on the web at: www.kevinvansant.com.

About the author: John Huntley (jhuntley@embarqmail.com) is a freelance writer based in the Chapel Hill, North Carolina. His work, focusing on music and the arts, has appeared in regional, national and international publications.

