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LISTENING WITH : GUILLERMO KLEIN; The Man That Got Away

By BEN RATLIFF

WHEN Guillermo Klein brings his band to the Village Vanguard for a week of shows starting June 13, it will be the return of a beloved musician who never got the chance to use the momentum he was building on New York's jazz scene in the late 1990's. Instead he slipped away to Argentina and then to Spain. In New York we usually don't draw the short straw like this. We have heard dispatches from Mr. Klein -- three fascinating records -- but have had to live with the fact that his evolution was taking place somewhere else.

In early 1994 Mr. Klein, an Argentine pianist and composer, arrived in New York from Boston, where he had attended the Berklee College of Music. He was 24 and soon found himself at Smalls, the Greenwich Village basement club on West 10th Street that opened the same year. Most of the members of a 17-piece band he had been writing for in Boston came down when he got a gig at Smalls in December; in February 1995 he was given every Sunday night at the club and kept that schedule for four years, more or less.

"He had such trust in the musicians," the singer Luciana Souza remembers of those nights. "He would bring in a sketch, and sometimes the musicians would write their own parts, in the moment. Guillermo had an amazing pool of musicians, all soloists. Everyone was already a bandleader, and some of them already had record deals. But they were still in the spirit of this collective thing. It was like a troupe, a tribe."

His music resembled nothing else, especially as it moved toward grooves and away from the harmonic exercises he had learned in music school. It was jazz, of a kind, but it included brass choirs, counterpoint, drones, Argentine and Cuban rhythms and a lot of singing. Some of the musicians were given parts to sing, and Mr. Klein sang himself, in a scratchy, smoky, untrained but emotional voice. There could be echoes of Steve Reich and Astor Piazzolla on the surface; deeper inside, there might be clues to other heroes: Duke Ellington, Hermeto Pascoal, Milton Nascimento, Wayne Shorter, Stravinsky and the Argentine pop composer Luis Alberto Spinetta. None of this sounded overthought, because Mr. Klein trusted his sense of song. If it didn't sound natural, he didn't play it.

His circle of colleagues and admirers came to include the best of their generation: Ms. Souza, Joshua Redman, Reid Anderson, Ethan Iverson, Mark Turner, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Tony Malaby, Jenny Scheinman, Claudia Acuña. Many of them were in his bands over the years; another six players from those days -- Diego Urcola, Chris Cheek, Jeff Ballard, Ben Monder, Miguel Zenon and Bill McHenry -- will be in his 11-piece group, Los Guachos, this month at the Vanguard. (Los Guachos, or loosely, the Bastards, comes from a common epithet in Argentina that can be used disparagingly or admiringly.)

There was an almost magical luck involved in the evolution of Mr. Klein's work, beginning with Smalls itself, which was unusual for its direct connection to the aspirations of young musicians. Mr. Klein's interest in self-promotion was dim at best. (It still is.) During his six years in New York he didn't live on much; for the first two, his parents helped him. He and his musicians earned about \$50 a night at Smalls, although the opportunity to perform frequently with a big band -- and to a growing audience -- was lavish recompense.

He lived at a number of addresses in Manhattan and Brooklyn, including a Hell's Kitchen squat where he really did have to squat: his bedroom ceiling was less than six feet high. He worked around a little bit: a spell as the pianist in Mr. Rosenwinkel's band at Smalls; some time in a trio at the East Village bistro Jules.

For four months in 1997 he took a job in Chicago, playing in a Gipsy Kings cover band with an old friend from Argentina. In September 2000, missing home and not making much of a living, he and his American wife, the photographer and teacher Kim Bacon, moved to Buenos Aires.

I caught up with Mr. Klein, now 36, during an afternoon last November at his small apartment in the Eixample neighborhood of Barcelona, not far from Las Ramblas, the city's central boulevard. He is self-effacing, wary, calm, sentimental, stubborn: a focused artist who just wants to get on with his work. He spoke quietly, so as not to wake his 1-year-old, Veronica.

His father, also named Guillermo Klein, worked as a fruit vendor during Mr. Klein's childhood in Buenos Aires, then pushed his way to an economics degree; by the late 80's he was president of Argentina's telephone company, then run by the state.

He gave his son a piano when the boy turned 11. A year later the young Guillermo began composing, and he started an apprenticeship with a teacher at 15, learning Bach fugues and chorales. His first pieces, he said, were inspired by Mr. Piazzolla, the composer, national hero and prime force of the "nuevo tango" movement.

"There are people that love Astor's 50's and 60's and 70's music," Mr. Klein said. "I love his very late work, from the 80's. I always listen as a composer. I need to hear the piece, I want to be inside the work. With this late period, his message was complete. I can hear it from beginning to end without wondering about form."

We heard "Contrabajísimo," a 10-minute piece from Mr. Piazzolla's record "Tango: Zero Hour," which some consider his peak achievement. It was made with his New Tango Quintet, a band that was unusual for its jazz-trained musicians: the violinist Fernando Suarez Paz and the guitarist Horacio Malvicino.

Typically for Mr. Piazzolla, it has a rugged main theme, surging with conviction. Then it grows soft and sentimental. "If you heard this section by a medium player," Mr. Klein pointed out, "it would be corny. It's flowery."

The piece returned to the aggressive main section. "Time goes by, and I cannot hear the chords," Mr. Klein said admiringly. "He makes you hear what he hears. It's so simple, the way it develops. Very obsessive. For me it's like an image of stepping very strongly along the earth and grabbing things, to go forward, clinging to them. Every step is really hard, taking you to a place that you didn't know you were going to reach."

The piece skidded to a well-defined stop. "Astor is like a friend that scolds you," Mr. Klein said. "He knows who you are, that kind of thing. If you write a good song, the first thing you think is, what would Astor think about this? "

When Mr. Klein was 18, his father invited his piano teacher home for dinner, to ask whether it was practical for his son to pursue music. "The guy said, 'Yeah, definitely,' " Mr. Klein remembered. " 'But he needs more than me. He should leave the country.' "

Mr. Klein had graduated from high school and was playing guitar in a rock band, covering Stones and Beatles songs. His mother read something in the newspaper about the Berklee College of Music; subsequently, the jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton, then a dean at Berklee, visited Buenos Aires to speak to music students. Mr. Klein attended the lecture and was struck by Mr. Burton's comment that performing with Mr. Piazzolla was a high point in his musical life. Soon Mr. Klein was in Boston.

He knew very little about jazz, having heard it only by accident in shopping malls. He loved Stravinsky, and his first idea was to study classical music.

"I showed the head of the classical department some fugues I had written, and he couldn't care less," he remembered, laughing. "Then I met some guys, like Diego Urcola" -- a trumpeter around his age, also from Buenos Aires -- "who were talking with so much passion about jazz."

A month later he started listening to the Wayne Shorter record "Speak No Evil," and something opened up. As a composer, Mr. Shorter is considered a genius of harmony in jazz; it is harder to parse his music in the scientific terms that music school can impose. Not very good at sight-reading and most passionate about learning and composing by ear, Mr. Klein likes to find his way to voicings and harmonic motion that sound as organic and freshly discovered as possible; he sensed the same in Mr. Shorter.

Later, on holiday, he saw Milton Nascimento in Argentina, which moved him to tears. He made his way to the mid-70's collaboration between Mr. Shorter and Mr. Nascimento, "Native Dancer," and he connected the dots between the two musicians.

We listened to "Miracle of the Fishes" from "Native Dancer." It is a scary piece of music: first a brisk, three-beat figure on guitar, with descending harmonic movement, under Mr. Nascimento's tremulous voice, with a melody that sounds as if it starts from the middle. After 15 seconds, everything begins to explode. An electric piano insinuates itself, and about two minutes in, Mr. Shorter appears, playing a great, gargly tenor-saxophone solo, slicing eccentrically phrased passageways through the chopping rhythm.

"I got very into this record," Mr. Klein said. "Maybe it was the fact of Milton and some grooves, also, which I felt close to, like kind of family." He made a few more passes at explaining his attraction to it, then gave up. "I don't know. The harmonies didn't feel like chords -- they were like an orchestra."

"It felt good to be in there," he said, motioning toward the speakers. "It's very different to the tritone thing, I think."

He was referring to the common substitute chords that are the basics of harmonic progression in jazz. Mr. Klein doesn't want to hear either hackneyed or overly fussy harmony.

Does his problem with a kind of official language of jazz harmony go back to bebop, I asked?

"No, no," he protested, "bebop is incredible. Charlie Parker is very clear to me. Bud Powell, too. They shape the harmony through the horn or through the piano, and you can hear exactly what harmony it needs. Bebop is one of the most important things in the 20th century, and Stravinsky, you know."

He paused. "Secretly it has to do with the heart," he said. "How you feel in your heart. I bet Milton and everybody in that record was really moved, and they knew they were doing something really clear and honest."

He and Reid Anderson, the American jazz bassist who has been living in Barcelona for the last year and a half, had recently talked about style, he said, and decided that it was all a construct. "You don't look for style," he said. "If something's going to be authentic, it will come out. I say, man, do your thing. What you're doing when you get with your friends: that thing becomes a style of its own."

"Like, we are filled with mediocrity, and some spots of inevitability," he continued. "When you hear Bach, you get the sensation that the whole thing was inevitable. It's an attempt to live every note. You feel part of something inevitable."

What might have been inevitable in 2000, when Mr. Klein and Ms. Bacon relocated to Buenos Aires with \$500 to tide them over, was the country's impending economic collapse. (His father, predicting the crisis, had warned him against moving back home.) He started to teach music, and got a gig at a new club called Thelonious, where his band ended up playing every Wednesday night, eventually filling the club each week.

By the middle of 2001, the school where Mr. Klein taught wasn't issuing paychecks. By December, there was a freeze on bank withdrawals. On Dec. 19 the band played a gig to about 40 people at Thelonious, and when they finished, Mr. Klein was told by the owner that not one person had paid. The day after, there were riots in Buenos Aires.

"Nobody had any money," he said. "There was trading. People didn't have money to pay for lessons, so

they would pay with food or a bicycle. You went walking everywhere. The thing is, there were people really listening at the club where we played, because it was such a crazy time that people needed to go out."

What came to Mr. Klein's rescue was a record deal with his American label, Sunnyside. In the middle of the madness, he made a record, "Una Nave," which was finally released last year. It turned out to be a gem, one of the year's best. In 2002 he moved to Barcelona, where he is finally making ends meet with regular local gigs and a teaching position in San Sebastián. Last winter he was finally given the honor of an invitation to play at the Vanguard, where he has never brought his band before.

When "Una Nave" was finally released in the United States, it was accompanied by an unusual news release.

"Guillermo Klein prefers that his music be judged without emphasis on biographical or historical context," it read. "Therefore, he has requested that a project biography not be written for the release of 'Una Nave.' However, Guillermo did wish to relate that the music, recorded while living in Argentina, was passionately made and well rehearsed."

The Man From Argentina

Guillermo Klein and Los Guachos will play from June 13 to June 18 at the Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Avenue South, at 11th Street, West Village, (212) 255-4037.

Recordings that Mr. Klein chose to listen to for this article:

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA "Contrabajísimo," from "Tango: Zero Hour" (Nonesuch, \$18.98).

WAYNE SHORTER "Miracle of the Fishes," from "Native Dancer" (Sony, \$9.98).

Recordings by Mr. Klein recommended by Ben Ratliff:

'Los Guachos II' (Sunnyside; \$16.98). From 1999, before Mr. Klein left New York; this is the American band at its best, including the singers Luciana Souza and Claudia Acuña; it includes two of Mr. Klein's near-masterpieces, "Diario de Alina Reyes" and "Se Me Va La Voz."

'Una Nave' (Sunnyside, \$16.98). Recorded in Buenos Aires in 2002, with a well-practiced Argentine band; it ranges from moments of near-rock to Indian and Cuban rhythms and the Argentine milonga, powerful contrapuntal writing for brass, and a few of Mr. Klein's own original vocal performances.

Images: Photos: The Argentine pianist, bandleader and composer Guillermo Klein, here at the Kresge Auditorium at M.I.T., makes his debut at the Village Vanguard on June 13. (Photo by C. J. Gunther for The New York Times)(pg. E1); Guillermo Klein at the Kresge Auditorium at M.I.T. on May 12. After years in Argentina and Spain, he has an engagement in New York. (Photo by C. J. Gunther for The New York Times)(pg. E4)

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