

SCOTT KINSEY

Acclaimed Keyboardist Scott Kinsey Offers Heartfelt Homage To Role Model and Mentor Joe Zawinul on *We Speak Luniwaz*

“Scott Kinsey’s realization of these Weather Report tunes manages to not only pay tribute to the works of Zawinul and Shorter but also to mine the music for discoverable gold. His band plays the daylights out of these tunes. This album deserves your attention.” — Peter Erskine

One of the most skilled keyboardists of his generation, Scott Kinsey is also one of the foremost interpreters of Joe Zawinul’s rich musical legacy. As former musical director of the Zawinul Legacy Band, Kinsey delivered electrifying performances worldwide in celebrating the maestro’s groundbreaking work with Weather Report and The Zawinul Syndicate. On *We Speak Luniwaz*, his Whirlwind Recordings debut, Kinsey brings his singular keyboard expertise to bear on re-imaginings of seven Zawinul compositions, plus one Weather Report tune by Wayne Shorter and two impressionistic originals.

In his liner notes to *We Speak Luniwaz* (the title is a backwards reference to the maestro himself), Kinsey wrote: “Zawinul’s music has been near and dear to me ever since the moment I first heard it. My objective was to try to do justice to this material, more than anything as a little thank-you note to someone who certainly changed my life...What Joe did was create his own personal language that was always in the moment and totally fresh! So with time, I also learned to speak Luniwaz, perhaps using my own personal dialect.” And he added, “I’m pretty sure he would have loved this record.”

Along with electric bass phenom Hadrien Feraud (Chick Corea, John McLaughlin), saxophonist-flutist Katisse Buckingham (Herbie Hancock, Zawinul Legacy Band) and Hungarian drummer Gergő Borlai (Al Di Meola, Nguyễn Lê), the core quartet is augmented by special guests Michael Baker (Zawinul Syndicate) and Danny Carey (Tool) on drums, saxophonist Steve Tavaglione (Allan Holdsworth, Dave Weckl), bassist Jimmy Haslip (Yellowjackets, Oz Noy), Bobby Thomas Jr. (Weather Report), Arto Tunçboyacıyan (Zawinul Syndicate), Cyril Atef and Brad Dutz on percussion, and Indian vocalist Naina Kundu. Together they generate crackling energy and percolating grooves on *We Speak Luniwaz*.

From entrancing Zawinul fare like “The Harvest” (*Dialects*, 1986), “Victims of the Groove” (*Lost Tribes*, 1992) and “Black Market” (*Black Market*, 1976) to smoking interpretations of “Fast City” (*Night Passage*, 1980), “Between the Thighs” (*Tale Spinnin’*, 1975) and “Where the Moon Goes” (*Procession*, 1983), Kinsey shows reverence for his mentor while injecting his own creative input into these signature Zawinul works. His take on the funky “Cucumber Slumber,” (a piece co-written by bassist Alphonso Johnson for Weather Report’s 1974 landmark, *Mysterious Traveler*), is melded to a spoken word segment entitled “World Citizen” that showcases Buckingham’s skills as rapper as it toasts Zawinul.

“I didn’t try to play these songs the way that Weather Report or The Syndicate or Joe did,” said Kinsey. “We didn’t play anything straight down. We did some different things so it’s not like us trying to be them or trying to play like they did. We’re using the structure and the basic elements of the song and putting our own thing into it too. I added my own sections and reharmonized things and took risks, which is almost taboo,” he said. “I mean, how do you reharmonize Joe Zawinul? But I feel like if you speak the language, if you hear it, then

of course you should do it. And I think Joe would've been totally behind that. Hopefully, I'm doing justice to his stuff in a way that he would've thought was cool."

A prolific composer and world-class improviser, Kinsey was the secret weapon in legendary jazz fusion group Tribal Tech with Scott Henderson, Gary Willis and Kirk Covington. He toured and recorded with the outfit for 20 years, appearing on 1992's *Illicit*, 1993's *Face First*, 1995's *Reality Check*, 1999's *Thick*, 2000's *Rocket Science* and 2012's *X*. Kinsey has also made seminal recordings with powerhouse electric band Human Element, featuring bassist Matthew Garrison, Tunçboyacıyan and drummer Gary Novak (2011's self-titled debut and 2018's *You Are In You*), as well as the acclaimed ARC Trio with Haslip and Borlai (their 2018 self-titled debut included special guests Vinnie Colaiuta, Gary Novak, Steve Tavaglione and Judd Miller). As a leader, Kinsey has presided over 2006's *Kinesthetics*, 2016's *Near Life Experience*, 2018's *No Sleep* and now 2019's *We Speak Luniwaz*. He has collaborated with the likes of Kurt Rosenwinkel, Alphonso Johnson, Robben Ford, Dennis Chambers, John McLaughlin, Peter Erskine, Bill Evans, Oz Noy, Tim Lefebvre, Thundercat, Flying Lotus and many others.

The late composer-arranger-bandleader and producer Bob Belden, once said of Kinsey, "He has taken the language of the synthesizer to the highest level in our modern times, as he is the first generation of keyboardists who developed electronically as opposed to the acoustic-centric classic piano model." Kinsey continues to push the envelope in exhilarating ways on *We Speak Luniwaz*.

"The way I learned about Joe was through articles in *Keyboard* magazine, where he would explain about how he would improvise and then it would become a tune. That's something I found really intriguing. I didn't know of any other musician who thought about music that way. So at that point I said, 'Ok, this is the guy for me! I have to check out everything from him that I can.' I just felt that Joe's approach was so synthesizer-oriented, and the fact that he improvised with synthesizers in a jazz context was unique to me. Now, I know Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock also did that, but it just wasn't as organic-sounding to me as it felt with Joe. He had a way of breathing life into his keyboards, unlike anyone I had ever heard."

Kinsey's entry into the musical world of Joe Zawinul was through Weather Report's 1984 album *Sportin' Life*. In quick succession he checked out Weather Report's *Night Passage* and then Zawinul's 1986 tour de force, *Dialects*. "When I heard those records I said, 'Ok, I gotta do something with those concepts myself.' And little by little, I found my own way. I remember reading a magazine article where (former Weather Report drummer) Peter Erskine described how they would improvise every night and how the songs would be completely different from night to night. That was important for me to realize. A lot of groups I knew were "arrangement bands" but Weather Report was not. They had some tight arrangements on certain songs but on others they would just know there was a melody and a framework, and they would improvise the harmony around that. They would go out on a limb every night. They were adventurers, and that really got my attention and made me want to understand what this world was all about."

By the time he relocated to California and joined Tribal Tech in 1991, Kinsey began incorporating some of Zawinul's concepts of collective improvisation into that band with guitarist Scott Henderson (Zawinul Syndicate, Chick Corea Elektric Band), bassist Gary Willis (Wayne Shorter) and drummer Kirk Covington (Allan Holdsworth). "Tribal Tech was an arrangement band when it started and I think when I came in, little by little as I gained their trust, they began incorporating some of my ideas. We started to get more improvisational and more risk-taking. Sometimes we would improvise entire sets and it was phenomenal, so we actually began creating songs on the fly like that. We did two records — *Thick* and *Rocket Science* — that

were completely based on group improvisation. Even on *Illicit*, my very first record with the band, there was a song called 'Aftermath,' which was completely improvised. And we were doing that kind of thing right up to our last album, *X*, which was improvised but sounds highly composed. By that time, we had a pretty keen sense of how to do that."

Kinsey has continued to inject those same concepts into his own recordings as a leader. "Sometimes I'll improvise myself and create tunes from those improvisations," he explained. "And that's a concept I learned from Joe. I was always trying to reverse-engineer what was going on with his music, and that led me into my own direction. Embracing Joe's concepts brought me to my own voice, which I have now."

Kinsey would eventually befriend Zawinul and was credited as assistant producer on the legend's 2002 studio album, *Faces & Places*. "I worked at least 100-something days on that record, pretty much every day for months. So it was a phenomenal experience for me because I always wondered, 'How does he do it?' And there were some stunning insights that I never would've imagined about how he worked in the studio. Everything with Joe was about the sound. I learned so much, literally by just sitting next to him."

Meanwhile, Kinsey injects his own personal flavor into these signature Zawinul tunes on *We Speak Luniwaz*, a heartfelt homage to his mentor. "The time I spent with Joe and Maxine was a really magical experience that will stay with me forever. And now, I draw on that inspiration for everything I do. In a way, that's why I made this record."

We Speak Luniwaz is scheduled for an October 25 release on Whirlwind Recordings.