

Developing a unique aesthetic is rarely a clean, linear process: when it comes to finding a musical voice, you can't get there from here by following a neat course. Into the lives of most artists come odd shifts, of attitude or manner, that shake up the logical order of things or the prevailing fashion. For guitarist Steve Khan, one of the more identifiable and underrated players of his generation, the shift came in the early '80s, when he began working in a refreshingly spare, moody setting that was less about grandstanding solos or grooved-lined machismo than it was about tapping into a collective dimension – a new place just below or to the side of jazz.

It was 1981 when the album **Eyewitness** was released, and Khan had already established himself as a New Yorker to reckon with (he was raised in Los Angeles, the jazz-loving show biz kid of legendary songwriter Sammy Cahn, but moved east in 1969). Khan had been the guitarist with the Brecker Brothers, and part of the guitar contingent for Steely Dan's classic album **Gauche**. As a leader, he had three impressive albums for Columbia and, for Novus, **Evidence**, an acoustic guitar Monk tribute that is now something of a cult classic, under his belt. But then came the shift. Settling into the sparse setting with bassist Anthony Jackson, drummer Steve Jordan, and percussionist Manolo Badrena, a new attitude laid itself out before him – and not one geared towards commercial or even critical dividends, but the stuff of self-realization.

"There's something about a keyboardless format that I feel really at home with now," Khan says. "The odd thing to me is that, if you would have asked me when I started playing the guitar if I could have envisioned myself doing this, I would have been terrified."

He's hardly terrified now. Khan's twelfth recording, **Got My Mental**, propels that lean aesthetic further, while clinging to core ideas that have been key to Khan's approach for more than 15 years now. It helps that, on this first album in four years, Khan is joined by sympathetic allies, drummer Jack DeJohnette and bassist John Patitucci, formidable players who have no trouble tapping into Khan's process of discovery and sharing in a collective appreciation for wide-open spaces.

With his clean yet enigmatic tone, his searching way with a phrase, his suspended harmonic sensibility and incisive use of silences, this is vintage Khan all over again, not a moment too soon. But there is a strong sense of Group Think that makes this recording significant, with the trio and periodic cameos from percussionists Don Alias, Bobby Allende, Marc Quiñones and Café. When they lay into the swing-cum-latin, percussion-enhanced version of Wayne Shorter's *Paraphernalia* or the elastic poetry of Ornette Coleman's

*R.P.D.D.*, the ensemble makes the tunes their own and gives the music an innate openness of feeling. Earthy and ethereal all at once, Keith Jarrett's *Common Mama*, from his **Expectations** album, comes across like folk music from another planet, or at least another plane. Even the undulating groove of the late, great Eddie Harris' *Sham Time* has an organic porousness to it. The trio stretches out to the tune of Lee Morgan's *Cunning Lee*, bringing to it a cryptic vigor. DeJohnette especially shines with an expansive solo.

Khan's only original here is the title cut, so named for something overheard on a talk show, as a woman described her lover's appeal: "he's got my mental." Anchored by a boppish head, the tune has a rubbery, kinetic energy, a sawtooth swing. The Khan original contrasts with the Cahn original on the program: the band achieves a breathy poise on *The Last Dance*, one of the many tunes popularized by Frank Sinatra and written by Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn.

As for the album's other ballad, Khan gives a powerfully evocative spin to *I Have Dreamed*. Here, the Rodgers and Hammerstein melody is poetically deprogrammed, stretched out in the service of a mysterious revision. The track is also given a Brazilian lilt by Café's berimbau, and a dreamy air via his background murmuring of the lyrics in Portuguese – like a pleasantly hazy memory drifting into consciousness. Khan says, "I'm really pleased with how that came out, because it's a nice blend of stating a beautiful old song and completely opening it up."

Opening things up is critical to what Khan is all about. As he notes, "Somebody said 'if you can take a free tune and make it sound like there are changes to it, and if you can take a tune with changes and structure and make it sound like a free tune, then you really have something happening.' Without trying to paste that philosophy onto what I'm doing, it has really turned out to be what has happened, quite by accident."

In a solo or in a career, jazz musicians are inclined to find that fragile but ultimately satisfying balance of knowing and not knowing: in the cracks comes inspiration and a sense of purpose. That's the transition place where Khan seems to be happily residing these days. By now, he's well on his way, having recognized the path and having set his artistic vision in "seek" mode.

– Josef Woodard

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