

Waves on the Fingertip: Benji Kaplan's Sonic Serendipity and Passionate Connection to Brazil Create a Precise, Shimmering Landscape on *Uai Sô*

In a pivotal moment, it all came together for young composer and Brazil-obsessed guitarist **Benji Kaplan**. He met the highly influential composer Guinga at a Brazilian music camp in California- an experience that connected his long-held passion for the language and music of Brazil with a newly discovered instinct to compose.

"I had been so connected to very traditional music: Jobim, Joao Gilberto, a very certain sound or harmonic landscape," says Kaplan, who first traveled to Brazil in his teens, after a childhood in love with Brazilian records. "When I met Guinga, and saw the way he approached music, it wasn't the same. I became fascinated and obsessed with composing."

The results shimmer and dance on *Uai Sô* (release: September 16, 2016), Kaplan's debut foray into Brazil's often overlooked, wildly varied melodic palette. Working like the midcentury songwriters he admired with a group of Brazilian lyricists, *Uai Sô* is rich with hints of jazz, samba, *forro*, and Brazil's classical heritage, shifting between delicately rhythmic and freeform fantasies, tied together by Kaplan's lilting, wistful vocals.

"I took all the years I'd spent arranging on the guitar and spun them out in a different landscape," reflects Kaplan. "It took on a different form, but I knew it was all connected: the conversations, the music, the cooking, the images, all connected...all these expressions of creativity and culture, related to this country and sound that I love. These elements express themselves with a natural, intrinsic beauty, as unintentional as those wavy designs that naturally occur in the skin of our fingers, a beauty that exists without us really doing anything. The music has it, and I do, too. We all have this."

{full story below}

When Kaplan met Guinga, he had been struggling as an artist. He felt creatively stifled. "I was terrified of veering away from being a bebop player," says Kaplan. "I had always been hell-bent on being a purely bebop jazz guitarist. The experience with Guinga's music made me see the world is not this straight and narrow road. It was a gateway drug of sorts."

At that time, Kaplan had been a jazz performance major at The New School in New York, studying music theory, committing the standard canon to memory, and learning to interpret solos by the likes of Budd Powell, Wes Montgomery, and Lester Young. Yet, while he recognized that he was gaining the essential foundational tools on which he would later be able to expand, he found himself creatively unfulfilled by the overtly academic approach of the music school setting.

"I needed to have an alternative, to keep my sanity. Everything was very cerebral," Kaplan muses. "I couldn't read music, and never really became fluent. I was much more of an ear person, and I would cling to the more intuitive side of music."

Kaplan found solace and a kindred, more instinctual spirit, in the Brazilian music that had fascinated him since childhood. Dedicated student by day, he regularly began to escape into his own world of musical intrigue by night. Scouring the internet for rare Brazilian compositions, he would sing and play the songs of composers like Chico Buarque, Dorival Caymmi, and perfected the choros of Waldir Azevedo. Having grown up in New York, the son of a Russo-Jewish Cuban percussionist father and Austrian-Jewish mother, he had been surrounded by obscure recordings from around the world and had, at a young age, taken keenly to Brazilian sambas and bossa novas.

At seventeen, Kaplan was finally able to travel to Brazil. He took in the decrepit beauty of Sao Paulo, wandered the streets of Rio, and spent his time interpreting rustic sambas heard in Lapa. It was during this trip that Kaplan's childhood enchantment with Brazilian music transitioned into the deep-seated passion for the language, culture, and aesthetics of Brazil, which he would later tap into.

Kaplan was eventually inspired to channel those sights, sounds, and lived experiences of his time in Brazil through a great store of technical knowledge. Even before he met Guinga, he had known that this creative impulse was within him. Creativity had flowed for many years, through painting, until the age of thirteen or so, when he'd suddenly stopped. Kaplan candidly recalls that he hadn't felt sure how it might come out in music.

Uai Sô is a strikingly sensual album, with each track acoustically animating a uniquely imagined visual landscape, a breathing ethnography of the streets of Brazil. For example, "Valsa da Metr pole," written in collaboration with lyricist Rita Figueiredo (who also did the graphic design for the album cover and booklet), is a song about Figueiredo's home city of Sao Paulo. The track mesmerizes with contrasted imageries of a desolate city, alive with a masterfully ordered orchestral chaos: "Traffic lights, so myopic, skyscrapers ... Tunnels of dreams, orphan and eager desperation...Saints, false idols, crystal images...The spiral of time doesn't stop, no!"

"When I wrote the song, I never dreamed of it as a song with lyrics...I just came up with it on the guitar," Kaplan recalls. "When I showed Rita the song, for two days, she spent hour after hour with it. The song is about the city, about Sao Paulo, where she's from. All the beautiful things about Sao Paulo, but also lots of ugly things, both physically and socially. The song juxtaposes imagery, the disconnection of the city."

The emphasis on the spirit of collaboration demonstrated in "Valsa da Metr pole" is at the heart of *Uai S *. Kaplan notes that he was deliberate in choosing contributing musicians, many of them from the musical theater and Avant worlds. Yet the album doesn't rely on instrumental improvisation; each phrase is played precisely as composed and written, a fact that highlights the daunting ambition of Kaplan's undertaking. The charts were sent to the musicians just a month ahead of recording, and the album was recorded in a series of homes and apartments without rehearsal.

"It was a lot of pressure for me and for them. It was both exciting and scary. But I had it all written out. This wasn't an album I wanted to leave to chance," Kaplan says. "Their beautiful voices and individual timbres shone through."