

GERI ALLEN & KURT ROSENWINKEL

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Les McCann, *Rest In Peace*

MARCH 2024

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On Expressing Beauty

BY JOSEF WOODARD

Ambrose Akinmusire has taken a broad approach to music these days. He released *Owl Song*, a subtle trio project. He penned a commission piece, *Isakoso Ara*, for the Monterey Jazz Festival. He's writing musical scores for TV and film. We check in with the gifted trumpeter and composer to see what's next.

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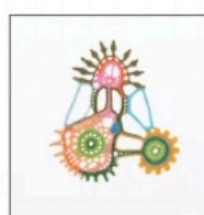
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Geri & Kurt
A 'LOVESOME' STORY IN PARIS

BY ALLEN MORRISON PHOTOS BY MICHAEL JACKSON



"Pianistic harmony is always something I've gravitated to in my guitar playing," said Rosenwinkel.



"It's like if you love food and can go to a Michelin star restaurant," Kurt Rosenwinkel said of playing with Geri Allen.

"There are a few musicians you hear where, as somebody once said, the molecules in the room change. Geri was one of them." Kurt Rosenwinkel, the revered American guitarist now making his home in Berlin, was talking about his impressions upon first hearing the late pianist/composer Geri Allen.

"It was like somebody had unlocked a door to the universe. It was just such a beautiful and metaphysical experience to listen to her play, not just the notes but also the spirit. It made a huge impression on me and drew me to her. I had an amazing experience just being in her presence. I felt a lot of gratitude to know somebody like that."

Rosenwinkel and Allen played together just three times before her untimely death from cancer in 2017. The first two were at a musicians' seminar/retreat in Denmark in 2009 and at the Jazz Standard in New York in 2012, where she was a guest artist with Rosenwinkel's quartet.

As a duo, however, they played together only once, and it was magical. The concert, recorded in Paris in 2012 and finally released late last year, after delays spanning more than a decade, became, remarkably, one of the most critically acclaimed jazz albums of 2023, showing up on many jazz "10 best" lists. It is *A Lovesome Thing* (Motéma/Heartcore), recorded at the Philharmonie de Paris as part of the city's Jazz à la Villette Festival.

The duo of piano and electric guitar is one of the trickier combinations in jazz: two musicians playing complex chordal instruments while trying not to step on each other's musical toes or overlap on the sonic spectrum. As in any duo, both musicians are completely exposed; there is no place to hide. There are a thousand ways to fail at any given moment.

The built-in complications may be the reason for the relative scarcity of such duos in jazz history. The Allen/Rosenwinkel meeting adds to the small pantheon of ingenious piano/guitar duo recordings from the likes of Bill Evans & Jim Hall, Brad Mehldau & Pat Metheny, Fred Hersch & Bill Frisell.

A Lovesome Thing contains only five songs, each averaging about 10 minutes: Billy Strayhorn's haunting, emotional "A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing," George Gershwin's "Embraceable You," Thelonious Monk's "Ruby My Dear" and two originals: Rosenwinkel's charming waltz "Simple #2" and Allen's previously unrecorded "Open-Handed Reach," which she had written for a tribute to pianist Billy Taylor.

Each track has a palpable sense of yearning and mystery. One hears the artists trying to conjure something sacred as they delicately converse, feel, support and finish each other's sentences.

"They had a wonderful ability to dance and not get in each other's way," Motéma founder Jana Herzen said in an interview from her San Francisco headquarters. "It can often get muddy when you combine those two instruments, but not here. They were worthy partners; there was a constant waterfall of ideas ... a special camaraderie that you can hear. It's a huge honor for us to be able to release this in combination with Heartcore [Rosenwinkel's record label]."

In her liner notes for the album, Ora Harris, Allen's long-time manager and an associate producer, wrote that "Geri considered the musical interaction that night to be a huge success. She also felt that the freedom of the duo was musically joyful, as it had so much beauty, space and warmth. ... In subsequent years she often spoke of the concert in Paris as having been very open, flowing and natural. Geri would be very proud to have this beautiful music available to the listening public."

Their ability to accompany each other so well seems to have been related to each artist's fondness for the other's instrument. Allen's swirling, rippling piano chords are often guitar-like, providing a warm embrace for Rosenwinkel's improvisational flights. And when she solos on piano, Rosenwinkel returns the favor. "Geri's chordal motion was very guitar-oriented," said longtime friend and collaborator Terri Lyne Carrington. For his part, Rosenwinkel's experience as a pianist — as heard on his 2022 album *Kurt Rosenwinkel Plays Piano* (Heartcore) — contributes to the duo's telepathy.

"I love the piano," Rosenwinkel said via Zoom from Berlin. "My mom and dad were pianists. I'm drawn to playing with pianists and always have been. But when you're playing with Geri Allen, that's just incredible. It's like if you love food and can go to a Michelin star restaurant — that's what playing with her was like."

The duo probes and reconsiders three familiar tunes, turning them into modernist dreamscapes. Their "Embraceable You," for instance, based on Herbie Hancock's bold arrangement on his 1998 album *Gershwin's World*, transforms the classic ballad with unexpected harmonies and lucid improvisations; often they linger on an emotionally redolent substitution to fully explore its

nuances. A kind of mind-melding occurs. At times, Rosenwinkel plays pianistic phrases on guitar as Allen strums the piano. Elsewhere, Rosenwinkel provides a gently percussive stream bed for Allen's descending ripples of sound.

After the ovation dies down, Allen is heard checking in with her audience, as if making sure they were still with her and Rosenwinkel. Giving Hancock credit for the arrangement,

"Instead, we met the day of the show at the venue, did a sound check and went over a couple of things very quickly: my original, her original, and we decided on the other tunes. I remember we went over the Herbie changes to 'Embraceable,' the chart for which Allen had sent in advance. And we touched on the very specific ending to 'Ruby My Dear.'"

"After the concert, the engineer gave me a CD with MP3s," Rosenwinkel continued. "I

duo with pianist Gerald Clayton. The concert was the culmination of a weekend of events celebrating the 20th anniversary of Motéma at Paris' Sunset-Sunside jazz club and featuring the label's latest artists, Flamenkora and Shuteen Erdenebaatar.

Clayton was part of a generation of young jazz pianists indelibly influenced by Allen. He got to know her a bit when he was living in New York, during the last decade of her life. "She put together special opportunities for young pianists to get together and play, solo and duo concerts," Clayton recalled from his home in Southern California. "She was a leader, not just of the jazz community, but also the piano community. Her solo piano record [2010's *Flying Toward The Sound* on Motéma] was a blueprint for so many other amazing artists, like Jason Moran, Vijay Iyer and Craig Taborn.

"I loved her fearlessness. She had the courage to really push beyond the personal boundaries we set for ourselves. We come to know our own playing, ears and sound; there's a tendency to stay a bit safe. Geri didn't do that. She always pushed beyond what she was capable of doing. I find that really inspiring."

Playing duo with Rosenwinkel "was like a bucket-list kind of experience for me; it was a joy," Clayton said. "That was the first time I got to play with Kurt in a duo. We exchanged a list of songs we'd like to play together, and his list was so hip. ... We played a fair bit of the album, half or more. Of course, we did the title cut. There was that beautiful arrangement of 'Embraceable You' with Herbie's reharmonization. We also played 'Quasimodo,' which is a contrafact of 'Embraceable You.' But because of Herbie's really wide, explorative reharm, nobody's ears were feeling like there was any redundancy there." The duo also performed "Self-Portrait In Three Colors" by Charles Mingus and "Pensativa" by Clare Fischer. Both artists said they expect to perform together as a duo again soon.

Both were similarly touched by Geri Allen's commitment, humility and aspiration to attain something transcendent. "We shared a harmonic language and a spiritual approach to the music," Rosenwinkel said. "She preferred to keep that stuff unspoken. She was down to earth and quite modest. She didn't take flights of fancy talking about these spaces, which are real but intimate and personal. We shared the reality of that spiritual stuff, but we kept it unspoken. We let the music do the talking. But she did acknowledge that element to me."

Herzen agreed: "Kurt and Geri met on a spiritual plane. That's what we're hearing in the music. For me, it's a miracle. You have to tune in at another level. Like love, we feel it, but it's invisible."

DB

'Kurt and Geri met on a spiritual plane.'

—Motéma's Jana Herzen

she says, "I don't know if you recognized the melody, but it was in there, amidst all that beautiful dense harmony."

In conversation, Rosenwinkel tried to explain their musical bond. "I think both of us are quite grounded in the craft, the tradition and the harmonic sense. Yet I felt we shared something mystical as well. ... I felt a lot of trust in both ways. Pianistic harmony is always something I've gravitated to in my guitar playing. And she is such a master of every kind of contour and orchestration on the piano and such a giving musician that she's able to create space for the other musicians around her. Everybody loved to play with her. She was always very generous as an accompanist. We both felt the same way about that. I love to accompany people. Even when I'm playing a solo with somebody, it's like I'm accompanying the accompanist."

He mused on Allen's contradictions. "She was so giving to the other musicians, and yet Geri was so fierce. She could be intimidating: an incredible, almost terrifying force on the piano. That was so exciting to me. But also so gentle and kind, accommodating and sweet — and as a person, very humble and down to earth."

Allen and Rosenwinkel had little time to prepare for this one-off concert. "I flew in on the day of the show, just with my Moffa Maryan archtop, hand-built in Italy," Rosenwinkel recalled. "And I just plugged into the amp, except for an octave pedal to give me some lower bass notes. I wanted to have a rehearsal, but Geri had a medical issue with her daughter, so we couldn't fly in a day early to rehearse.

had the recording and sent it to Geri. And I listened to it, and thought it was wonderful, a beautiful piece of music. I had it in the back of my mind for years that I possessed this recording and would someday release it.

"In 2017, about the time when I started Heartcore, I decided I wanted to release it. It was about that time that Geri passed. So I approached Geri's manager, Ora, with the idea to put it out. She suggested that Jana be involved, too. So the three of us started to do it together. We approached Cité de la Musique [the Parisian complex that includes the Philharmonie] and asked them for the rights. They said they belonged to SPEDIDAM [a French property rights organization for performers]. Then ensued five years to get it out from under their jurisdiction. It was like pulling teeth. They made tough financial demands."

SPEDIDAM's purpose is to preserve the rights of performers at live concerts — "a noble mission," Rosenwinkel said. "But it became clear that 90 percent of the financial figures they were demanding would go back to us."

Negotiations started and stopped. They were interrupted by the untimely death of Herzen's partner, bassist Charnett Moffett, in 2022. "Finally, Jana reinitiated discussions, and the figure magically changed to something we could afford. It was a beautiful team, the three of us, because we all felt strongly about the music and were doing it as a testament to Geri. It was a labor of love."

In celebration of the release of *A Lovesome Thing*, Rosenwinkel traveled to Paris in November to play songs from the album in a