

Jazzing up the songs of Bruce Cockburn

BY LI ROBBINS, TORONTO

In a tossup between the generic (a.k.a. Starbucks), and a chi-chi little spot close to the offices of his downtown Toronto record label (True North Records), guitarist Michael Occhipinti claimed at first not to care which would be the site for the interview. Then a decisive smile crossed his face — "I know, let's go to the Rex."

It made perfect sense — the Queen Street bar was the laboratory for the music Occhipinti wanted to talk about, not to mention being where he first met Bruce Cockburn, the inspiration for Occhipinti's new CD, *Creation Dream: The Songs of Bruce Cockburn*. Cockburn had dropped by the Rex last winter to hear Occhipinti playing with the Neufeld-Occhipinti Jazz Orchestra (NOJO), the Juno-Award-winning 16-piece group Occhipinti co-leads with keyboardist Paul Neufeld.

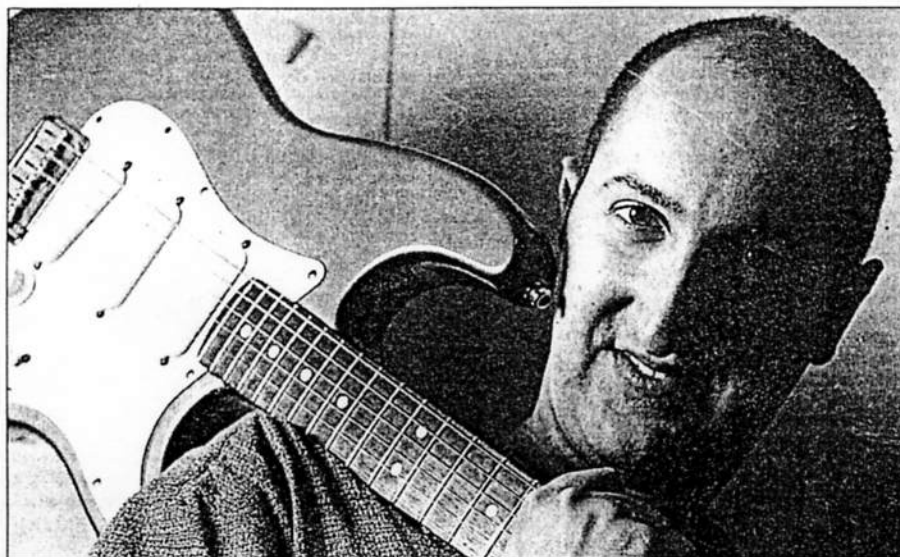
At the time, the idea for a recording of instrumental versions of Cockburn songs was still a hopeful gleam in Occhipinti's eye. But Cockburn's sanction was essential. As Occhipinti said, "I didn't want to do it unless a), Bruce was into it, and b), he was interested in having me be the one to do it." (Cockburn proved to be both — he even took part in one of the sessions — playing acoustic guitar on the track *Pacing The Cage*.)

The formalization of the idea for the recording came later, with True North Records label boss, Bernie Finkelstein.

True North (Cockburn's label and the label for Occhipinti's 1998 recording, *Surrealist Blues*) was the obvious choice. For one thing, Cockburn could easily monitor the project in progress — he heard all of the rough mixes. And given the iconic status of some of the songs on *Creation Dream*, (*If I Had A Rocket Launcher* and *Lovers In A Dangerous Time*, for example), having Cockburn's blessing on the interpretations was no small potatoes.

Occhipinti is a graduate in jazz performance from York University (BFA Honours) and an alumnus of the noted Banff Festival for the Arts jazz workshops. Interpreting the music of Bruce Cockburn might seem an abrupt departure. But it evolved out of two things — his love of Cockburn's music and his credo of what a young jazz player ought to be doing.

"I've always wanted to play



TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Jazz guitarist Michael Occhipinti: 'I didn't want to do it unless a), Bruce was into it, and b), he was interested in having me be the one to do it.'

music written in my own lifetime and incorporate that into my jazz group. I mean, I like playing jazz standards, but when you think of the people who made those standards famous, whether it was Charlie Parker or Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, they performed songs that were on the radio at the time. It was only later that some in jazz began dismissing pop music."

One to put principles into practice, Occhipinti did incorporate pop songs into performances with his group (the nucleus being Barry Romberg on drums and Andrew Downing on bass). Songs like Cockburn's *One of the Best Ones*.

Why Cockburn? "I really love his songwriting, he's such a beautiful lyricist, and a great guitar player."

It suggests the question — doesn't the music of a "beautiful lyricist" inherently require a singer to truly bring those songs to life? "Part of the process of picking the music for the recording was trying songs and realizing that some of the songs don't work without hearing the lyrics," admitted Occhipinti, adding that one of his goals was staying true to the spirit of Cockburn's lyrics.

Occhipinti's air of slight owliness, suggested by round glasses perched on an aquiline nose, was contradicted by his tone. He was al-

most gleeful recounting the evolution of his arrangement of the title track, *Creation Dream*, "the one that strays the furthest from the vibe of the original lyrics, it's the really rocking one."

And Occhipinti sees *Creation Dream* as a logical extension of his work as a jazz player. "Bruce's music is very jazz-aware music. He's obviously still writing fairly conventional chord progressions, but definitely he throws in chord voicings that you don't usually hear and chord substitutions that speak of someone who has had exposure to jazz. I was attracted to his music in part because I knew the raw goods were there to play with."

Occhipinti acknowledged he felt a certain pressure to take those goods and retool them. "It was important that this not just be a re-statement of a Bruce song with no Bruce. I wanted to have me in it. And I didn't want to do those tunes without presenting them in a way that people who knew those songs would raise their eyebrows and say, 'Hey, I know that song,' but hopefully it would take them a minute."

The proof is in the recording. An angular, whimsical opening to *Wondering Where the Lions Are* gives way to an explosive violin solo (played by long-time Cockburn sideman, Hugh Marsh) and eventu-

ally Occhipinti's own moody guitar loops. Trumpeter Kevin Turcotte invokes a Miles-esque sensibility on *Lovers In A Dangerous Time*. And American clarinet player Don Byron is an intensely compelling

presence on several tunes. (Occhipinti's quintet includes Byron in performances of the music from *Creation Dream* this week at Toronto's Top O' The Senator jazz club.)

The songs on *Creation Dream* aren't just Cockburn hits. Occhipinti took the entire Cockburn canon (25 CDs' worth) and after months of intensive listening, honed it to 11 choices, including pieces like the more obscure *Homme Brulant*. (One of the recording's gems, described by Occhipinti as "inherently a jazz tune.")

Occhipinti found the process both gratifying and frustrating. "It was tough. I realized I wouldn't even be able to play a song from each CD, unless they were going to be really short. Unfortunately with a CD, you're always thinking that 74 minutes is your limit. We had to make some hard decisions. There were a couple of songs I was heart-broken to have to cut."

Perhaps then there'll be *Creation Dream, Part Two*? Occhipinti laughs — clearly the idea's already more than a gleam in his eye.

Michael Occhipinti's quintet, including guest Don Byron, performs music from *Creation Dreams* tonight through Oct. 1 at the Top O' The Senator. Special to The Globe and Mail