

# Michael Occhipinti pays musical tribute to hero Cockburn

## A Dream come true

About the best homage a pop or rock musician can get is to hear their music translated into jazz.

That, or it's a sure way to make them wince.

Either way, Toronto jazz guitarist Michael Occhipinti must have been just a little nerve-wracked while making *Creation Dream*, his new instrumental tribute to Bruce Cockburn: Cockburn not only gave him his advance blessing, he was present for some of the sessions.

"My one rule was that I didn't want to do this record if Bruce wasn't behind it," says Occhipinti, who plays the Top O' The Senator tonight through Sunday.

"But he was very pleased. He thanked us for what we were doing to his music, which meant a lot to me."

That the *Creation Dream* ensemble featured violinist Hugh Marsh and producer Jonathan Goldsmith — both longtime Cockburn associates and friends — couldn't have hurt.

Cockburn even lent his own acoustic guitar skills to Occhipinti's reworking of the tune *Pacing The Cage*.

But it's Occhipinti's keen sense of marrying the familiar with the unfamiliar that ultimately guides the songs into a new sonic space.

Both on his own and with group NOJO (the Neufeld-Occhipinti Jazz Orchestra), the guitarist's greatest strength is striking a balance between the accessible and the adventurous, often embracing big band jazz or classic blues sounds in the same breath as catchy funk and/or sprawling avant-garde sounds.

*Creation Dream* evolved out of his association with Cockburn's

record label, True North, springboard for NOJO's album *You Are Here* and his solo disc *Surrealist Blues*.

Still, while such jazz-pop meetings are traditionally reserved for obvious pop staples, Cockburn's left-of-centre take as a tunesmith made for an ideal fit.

"Two years ago I got a copy of Bruce's *Nothing But A Burning Light*, and I started covering a really pretty tune on that called *One Of The Best Ones*," Occhipinti says.

A version of *If I Had A Rocket Launcher* followed and, by last spring, Occhipinti's trio was working out a set of Cockburn numbers during a series of gigs at The Rex on Queen St. W.

"Here we were taking music where the lyrics really are important and serious and removing that key component. The key challenge was finding out what worked without the words."

He adds: "Bruce has had some exposure to jazz theory, and you can tell by the chords and forms he uses. So there was definitely an appeal. It's a little more sophisticated in terms of the chord voicing and stuff than, say, Neil Young's music — and this is not to say that one is better than the other."

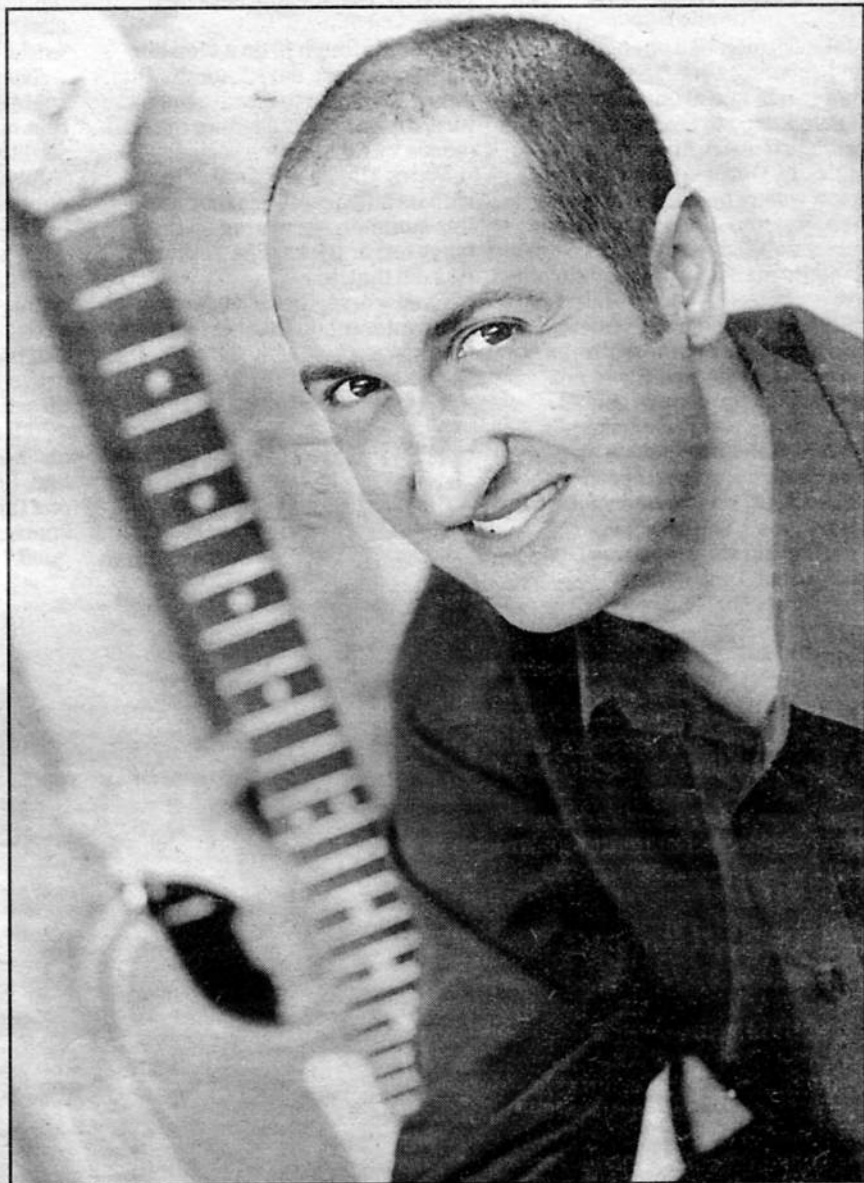
Occhipinti says he wanted foremost to present an album that would be fresh to Cockburn's fans. As for getting respect from jazz-heads, that's a trickier prospect.

"I'm not a dummy," he says,



**I'm not a dummy. I know there will be suspicious minds**

— Michael Occhipinti on the reaction he expects from the jazz community to his new album



**MICHAEL OCCHIPINTI** ... He's at the Top O' The Senator though Sunday.

laughing. "I know there will be suspicious minds in the jazz community.

"Since the advent of rock — which coincided with the explosion of the avant-garde in jazz — there may have been a mindset that jazz musicians were undermining the music somehow when they got away from the standard song-books.

"But the bottom line is that most jazz is now irrelevant to the life ex-

periences of a lot of people, in a way that it wasn't years ago. When Miles Davis played *Bye Bye Blackbird* and certainly when John Coltrane did *My Favourite Things*, those were songs that everybody knew. Immediately people were willing to go a little further with the musician.

"And it lets you inject some of your own life experience into your playing. Jazz is an approach to music, not a repertoire."