

Boy without boundaries

Gabriel Birnbaum's music mixes styles, personas

By James Reed

GLOBE STAFF

NEW YORK — Gabriel Birnbaum's arms fly up into the shape of a "V" right as he calls out an enthusiastic, "Yes! Awesome!" That's how he reacts when told that his new

SCENE & HEARD

album is nearly impossible to classify. "V" is definitely for victory.

Birnbaum records under the name Boy Without God, a project he started when the Brookline native was still living in Boston and struggling to strike out on his own. But on "God Bless the Hunger," the new album he'll celebrate with a release show at the Cambridge Family YMCA next Thursday, Birnbaum finally realized he doesn't have to minimize his talents.

"I feel like a lot of everything I do has been determined by me feeling like I'm a saxophone player and not really a songwriter or a singer," Birnbaum says earlier this week over pizza at a restaurant near his apartment in Brooklyn. "This is the first time I feel like I'm legitimately good enough to be this."

And by this, he's referring to a quixotic mix of styles and personas. Just when you have an idea of what Boy Without God is about — it's folk, it's experimental jazz, it's '60s pop, it's art rock — the landscape shifts to a whole new view.

"I tend to jump around," says Birnbaum, who's 25. "I was obsessed with jazz when I was younger because my brother was a jazz pianist and a bit of a prodigy. I was listening to jazz all the time and thought everything else was stupid. I refused to let people listen to rock music in the band

room at high school. I would literally turn off Radiohead and put on jazz. I was such a jerk."

At 19, he decided he was going to be a downtown New York free-jazz musician, even befriending some of the scene's

BOY WITHOUT GOD

With Sleepy Very Sleepy and Tamsin Wilson

At: Cambridge Family YMCA Theatre, 820 Mass. Ave., Central Square, next Thursday, 7 p.m.

Tickets: \$10. 617-661-9622, www.cambridgeymca.org

characters who would soon become his mentors. When that dream faded, he turned his attention to Boston's music scene. His eclectic tastes paid off, playing a variety of instruments with other musicians with Boston roots, from Eli "Paperboy" Reed to Drug Rug and the One AM Radio.

As a bandleader, Birnbaum first made his name around here in 2006, with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, whose "noisy, free-jazz rock" gave him a cult following that wasn't exactly satisfying. "It was so inscrutable that I could have just kept doing that and kept writing the same songs over again," Birnbaum says.

Instead, he pursued songwriting, which dovetailed with his budding interest in indie rock such as Elliott Smith and Neutral Milk Hotel. When he moved to Brooklyn last year, he decided it was time to take Boy Without God more seriously while keeping his hometown ties intact. Some of his band's core players — including Elio DeLuca (of Hallelujah the Hills, who coproduced the new album) and Danny Mekonnen (of Debo Band) — still live around here. Birnbaum started a separate chamber

group based in New York, allowing him to play around town more often.

Birnbaum has previously recorded at home, with varying results in fidelity. He made "God Bless the Hunger" at the Soul Shop, a studio in Medford that's as much about its all-analog equipment as it is a philosophy of pure sound. Birnbaum wanted the album to reflect the new-found sincerity and confidence that were blossoming in his music.

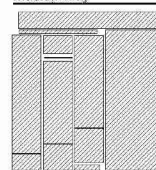
Technically, 2008's "Your Body Is Your Soul" was Boy Without God's full-length debut, but the new album marks more of an artistic statement. On it he plays rhythm guitar, tenor saxophone, horns, some piano. With composer Nico Muhly's work in mind, he wrote the intricate orchestral arrangements, a skill he learned early on. ("My mom made me go to Longy School of Music every Saturday morning when I was a little kid, so I learned music theory," he says. "I did New England Conservatory's prep program on Saturdays as well.")

The album's cornucopia of sound, from blasts of horns to seriously jagged saxophone skronk, reflects Birnbaum's new reliance on a group dynamic to flesh out his music. He's still upfront that Boy Without God is very much his baby.

"The deal with the band, and I always explain this to everyone before they join, is this is a dictatorship," he says. "I love your input, but I always have the final say. And no one is ever in the band forever except me."

As for the curious band name, Birnbaum has a good story about it. Here's the abbreviated version:

music/friday



While attending Boston College, he noticed a beautiful woman on the train one day and proceeded to give her directions to a building on campus. As he walked her there, he detected a foreign accent (probably Italian, he thinks). When they passed a seminary, he confessed that he didn't believe in God.

The beautiful stranger laughed at the atheist attending a Catholic school and gave him a fitting farewell: "Thank you, thank you, boy without God!"

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Birnbaum, who performs and records under the name Boy Without God, says of his musical style, "I tend to jump around."

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