



## SCOTT KINSEY: Near Life Experience

By John Kelman, All About Jazz, June 2016

It's been a full decade since Scott Kinsey last released an album under his own name (the 2006 Abstract Logix debut, *Kinesthetics*) and, if anything, *Near Life Experience* manages to trump actually its predecessor in both ambition and Kinsey's significant cast of invited contributors. *Near Life Experience* also continues to hone the cinematic keyboardist's increasingly expansive, pan-cultural musical world view; one that has long dominated the keyboardist's work, dating back to his days playing with [Tim Hagans](#) and [Bob Belden's](#) *Animation—Imagination* (Blue Note, 1999) group...and even farther back to his twenty-year tenure (including a lengthy collective hiatus) in guitarist [Scott Henderson](#) and bassist [Gary Willis'](#) fusion juggernaut *Tribal Tech*, beginning with 1992's *Illicit* (Blue Moon, 1992) and finishing, on a high note, with *X* (Tone Center, 2012)—a swan song that comes very close to 1991's *Tribal Tech* (Relativity) as one of the quartet's very finest albums.

Overall, *Tribal Tech* suggested how an earlier fusion supergroup, [Weather Report](#), might have sounded had it been a keys/guitar/bass/drums/sometimes percussion lineup, with every band member contributing the latest technologies available for their respective instruments and with a stronger predilection for delineated soloing rather than *Weather Report's* largely career-long keys/saxophone/bass/drums/percussion configuration that, including group co-founders [Joe Zawinul](#) and [Wayne Shorter](#), was more about an "everybody solos and nobody solos" aesthetic. Kinsey's own work—which must surely also include the superb collaborative group, [Human Element](#), which released its [2011 Abstract Logix debut](#) after [a premiere performance](#) (with [Ranjit Barot](#) substituting for the unavailable [Gary Novak](#)) at the 2010 Raleigh, NC [New Universe Music Festival](#)—has gradually evolved, over the past two decades, into something which is undeniably the sum total of its many past parts—past parts that also include [Miles Davis](#), [Ahmad Jamal](#), Gnawa and Gamelan music (amongst many African and Asian influences)—but which has become, by now, something more intrinsically personal and unmistakably Kinseyian.

Kinsey's opening "Rave"—dedicated to Belden, who passed away too young at 59, in the spring of 2015—exemplifies everything that is consistent (but evolving) about Kinsey *and* many of the things that are new with *Near Life Experience*. Despite being a relatively small quartet setting, with bassist [Tim Lefebvre](#) and Hungarian drummer Gergo Borlai (both apparent newcomers to Kinsey's recording circles) joining the wonderfully unpredictable Armenian percussion/vocalist/*Human Element* alum [Arto Tunçboyacıyan](#)—Kinsey traverses considerable territory on an energetic six-minute piece propelled by Borlai and Tunçboyacıyan's relentless groove, while Lefebvre's notes are carefully chosen but never at the expense of maintaining the same forward motion created by his bandmates. That leaves Kinsey

plenty of freedom to orchestrate a piece that moves from vamping over a bouncing pedal point to delivering a knotty sequence of changes that, in their sonic breadth alone, must be a considerable challenge for Kinsey to execute live. There are hints of electronica amidst the booty-shaking pulses to give the song's title its validity, but Kinsey's intrinsic sophistication ultimately renders "Rave" as intelligent dance music that gradually soars—rhythmically, melodically, harmonically and, in the end, emotionally—towards its stratospheric conclusion.

Kinsey also introduces a bit of chill with his look at Marvin Gaye "Inner City Blues" (cowritten with James Nyx Jr.), the closing track on the soul megastar's hit record, *What's Going On* (Motown, 1971). Driven by LeFebvre, Tunçboyacıyan and France-based drummer [Cyril Atef](#), it combines Tunçboyacıyan and Jason Joseph's vocals with Kinsey's vocoder, amidst floating layers of synth and bolstered by gritty Fender Rhodes, to create an open-ended and thoroughly contemporary (and, sadly, still relevant) take on Gaye's chart-topping but nevertheless bleak missive about inner city America of the 1970s.

Although every member of Human Element shows up on *Near Life Experience* a number of times, they only come together as a whole once: on the brutally intense title track. Novak's high octane drumming opens up a frenzied Kinsey composition driven by seemingly relentless changes—almost remarkably so in Kinsey's ability to simultaneously weave a melody through such a dense construction that also features longtime musical partner, reed/woodwind multi-instrumentalist [Steve Tavaglione](#), largely doubling Kinsey's lines throughout...though there is a brief, compelling moment, midway through, where bass, drums, percussion and layers of keys are stripped away. First, just one saxophone and synth are left intertwining, followed by two overdubbed saxophones, as Kinsey and the rest of the band gradually reenter, leading to a closing section where brief solo passages are impressively traded around by Tavaglione, bassist [Matthew Garrison](#) and Kinsey, amidst almost mindbogglingly complex passages.

Kinsey's "Kingpin" is a similarly maelstrom-inducing track where drummers Danny Carey and Tribal Tech alum [Kirk Covington](#) open the tune on an explosive note—just two drummers "duking it out"—until the two come together with a thundering reggae pulse, driven hard by bassist [Jimmy Earl](#) and defined largely by the alternation of [Michael Landau](#)'s whammy bar-driven electric guitar with Kinsey's greasy Rhodes and jagged synth tones. Revolving largely around just two lengthy pedal tones, it's an example of just how much can be done with a simple premise, once placed in the right hands. Landau's contributions to "Kingpin" are definitive; this LA-based session ace may not be a well-known name, but a look at his list of recording dates—ranging from [James Taylor](#), [Joe Cocker](#) and [Joni Mitchell](#) to [George Duke](#), [Boz Scaggs](#) and [Miles Davis](#)—says all that need be said, along with his small but impressive solo discography, the most recent being the impressive *Organic Instrumentals* (Tone Center, 2012). Here, however, with Kinsey clearly giving him completely free rein, Landau proves as tasty as [Jeff Beck](#)...but even nastier still, with a similar capacity for drawing previously unheard textures from his instrument and building solos that are compositionally focused...a perfect match for Kinsey.

Kinsey's ongoing interest in world music pervades every track on *Near Life Experience*—as does his dedication to fashioning the ever-growing bevy of textural sound components (largely but not exclusively synth-driven) that comprise his broad sound world—but there are some in which the keyboardist's expansive cross-cultural interests are particularly clear, most notably the triptych that draws the album towards its two-part closer, "Dream Catcher," which ends *Near Life Experience* on a more relaxed note.

Kinsey's angular but percussion-driven "Siya" is a nod, in part, to the dense jungle jams of '70s-era Miles Davis, with Tavaglione's bass clarinet completing the referential picture; but the addition of

Tunçboyacıyan's and, in particular, Lalah Hathaway's wordless vocals—and Kinsey's rare but most welcome acoustic piano work—take the piece somewhere else entirely. Two traditional African tunes round out the triptych, both given arrangements by Kinsey that draw them seamlessly into the keyboardist's inimitable universe: the atmospheric yet rhythmically rambling "Baba Moussa," featuring one of tenor saxophonist [Seamus Blake](#)'s two guest appearances and a polyrhythmic stew from drummer Novak and three percussionists, who contribute both untuned and tuned instruments; and "Fulani," a particularly vivid piece recorded live in Morocco, where Kinsey's 21st century electronics soar over a driving cross-cultural blend of three percussionists (Guinean djembe and kalimba player Yéyé Kanté, Moroccan-born Rhani Krija and Ivory Coast balifonist Aly Keita), Algerian drummer Karim Ziad and Moroccan Maalem Hassan Boussou on bass guimbri and vocals. The sum total of these three pieces builds to a climax that renders the closing "Dream Catcher" all the more essential as a means of coming down from the emotional high created across the triptych's 20-minute duration and catching a bit of breath.

That Kinsey's albums are few and far between is, indeed, a shame; that said, so much time between releases only renders each successive album all the more shocking for its evolutionary and, in some ways, *revolutionary* stance. If *Kinesthetics* was, indeed, an exceptional album, then *Near Life Experience* is Kinsey's first recording to bear the markers of a masterpiece in the making. Not that he hadn't already honed his own sound and approach— making him so in-demand with artists who, in addition to Tribal Tech, Belden and Hagans, range from [Kurt Rosenwinkel](#) and [Jimmy Herring](#) to Joe Zawinul and [Nicholas Payton](#), amongst others. But the sonic, melodic, rhythmic and improvisational strengths of *Near Life Experience* make it the album where Kinsey finally comes completely out from under the shadows of others to stand: free, clear and unmistakable.

Track Listing: Rave; Inner City Blues; Lies; Burbank Boulevard; Money Maker; Near Life Experience; Kingpin; Siya; Baba Moussa; Fulani; Dream Catcher Pt 1; Dream Catcher Pt 2.

Personnel: Scott Kinsey: synthesizer, piano, vocoder; Steve Tavaglione: alt, tenor and soprano saxophones, bass clarinet and flute (3, 6, 8, 9, 11); Seamus Blake: tenor saxophone (4, 9); Judd Miller: EVI (6); Martin Ptak: trombone (6); Michael Landau: guitar (7); Kirk Fletcher: guitar (5); Lala Hathaway: vocals (8); Arto Tunçboyacıyan: vocals (2, 4, 5, 8, 9), percussion (1-6, 9); Jason Joseph: vocals (2); Maalem Hamid El Kasari: vocals (3); Maalem Hassan Boussou: vocals and guimbri (10); Matthew Garrison: bass (6, 11); Jimmy Earl: bass (7, 8); Hadrien Feraud: bass (3); Tim Lefebvre: bass (1, 2, 4, 5); Brad Dutz: percussion (4, 9); Alope Dutta: tabla (3); Yéyé Kanté: djembe, kalimba (9, 10); Rhani Krija: percussion (10); Aly Keita: balifon (10); Gary Novak: drums (3, 6, 9); Danny Carey: drums (7); Kirk Covington: drums (7, 8, 11); Cyril Atef: drums (2-5); Georgo Borial: drums (1); Karim Ziad: drums (10).

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