

Pop Talk: Eldar takes his chops on the road

by *George_Varga*

How busy is Eldar Djangirov, the 20-year-old jazz piano sensation with the boyish looks and monster instrumental chops? Let us count the ways.

On Aug. 7, he performed on the Los Angeles-based "Jimmy Kimmel Live," making him one of the few jazz artists of any age to play on that late-night TV show.

ELDAR - Eldar Djangirov is a 20-year-old jazz piano sensation with the boyish looks and monster instrumental chops. CNS Photo. The next day found this acclaimed virtuoso back at the 17,500-seat Hollywood Bowl, where he earned a rousing ovation for his performance at the 2006 Playboy Jazz Festival. Eldar (he doesn't use his last name professionally) wraps up August with a weeklong gig at New York's famed Blue Note jazz club, where he recorded his dazzling 2006 live album.

Then comes a fall concert tour of Japan, South America and Europe. It will include shows in Russia, but not the former Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, where Eldar was born and lived until he and his parents moved to the United States when he was 11. Then, it's back to his new home in Manhattan, with more concerts and recording dates to follow.

"My schedule is mapped out through the first half of 2008," said Eldar, who lived in Rancho Bernardo, Calif., with his parents from 2003 to 2005. "But I've been off since mid-July. So now I'm just chillin' and kickin' it, and exploring New York City."

A 2005 graduate of San Diego's Francis Parker High School, Eldar moved to New York eight months ago. He had earned a full scholarship to University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music but couldn't juggle academia with his professional commitments.

"I was going on the road a lot and missing a lot of school," he said. "My last semester at USC was the 2006 fall semester, and that was when my 'Live at the Blue Note' album was recorded in New York."

His attention is now focused on his ambitious new album, "re-imagination," which was released June 5. It's his third release for Sony Masterworks and the first on which he performs on electric keyboards as well as acoustic piano.

The album, which earned a four-star review in *Down Beat*, this country's oldest monthly jazz magazine, features Eldar playing with three different rhythm sections. It also finds him collaborating with acid-jazz turntable wiz and sonic engineer DJ Logic, whose past credits range from Medeski, Martin & Wood to the jam band moe.

"I wanted to use the recording studio as an instrument," said Eldar, who cites Radiohead and Bjork among his nonjazz favorites. "I definitely didn't want this to be my 'electronic' record, and I didn't want to do a conventional acoustic record, either. So I had to find a blend.

"I think it's a very natural way for me to evolve. I never want to depart from what I love, which is to play jazz. But we can't play standards 24/7."

Nine of "re-imagination's" 11 songs are by Eldar. That's the highest number of self-composed pieces on any of his three major-label albums or on his preceding two indie releases. Yet, while the context may vary on "re-imagination," the spotlight remains on his jaw-dropping instrumental technique and often fiery attack. The new album also features his spirited version of "Place St. Henri" by Oscar Peterson, the legendary Canadian jazz pianist whom Eldar saluted last month during an all-star tribute concert at Carnegie Hall.

"Oscar was the first jazz pianist I ever heard," said Eldar, who was expertly emulating Peterson's playing while still in grade school.

"It was really exciting to do a tribute to someone who means so much to me. But my biggest role model is Chick Corea. He's still at the top of his game at 66, and he's so prolific and always on the move."

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