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THE (MULTI) TALENTED SEÑOR KRYGIER

There's no point trying to categorise the music of Argentinian maverick Axel Krygier as Ed Stocker finds out – best just immerse yourself in his *música mestiza* and decide for yourself

PHOTO KARIN IDELSON

Axel Krygier, Buenos Aires' king of alternative cool, has just arrived in London off the Eurostar from Paris. Looking a little crumpled, the vocalist, composer and multi-instrumentalist seems keen to lay his cards on the table. "Those who come and listen to me won't be shocked by how well I play the piano or the flute," he says, leaning forward. "But what interests me more is that feeling of producing something 'in the moment' that moves you and you don't really know why."

Attend one of his shows – from the *boliches* of Buenos Aires to a European festival field – and you'll get a sense of that ability to move crowds that he's talking about. Krygier is one of those rare artistic breeds, a performer whose act offers the punter something fresh and a little bit different. It's *música mestiza* at its world citizen, borderless best, but it's also free from the overtly simple world outlook of, say, Manu Chao. Krygier's music is complex and demands attention. It flits from rock and pop to *cumbia* and folklore, drawing on influences from France, the Caribbean and South America. One moment Krygier might be singing in a wistful falsetto, the next second he'll have clicked a button at his feet and his contorted voice will hiss out of the speakers as he makes full use of the distortion effects.

Krygier was born in 1969 and raised in the Argentinian capital. His Spanish rolls off the tongue with that singsong, almost Italian-infused lilt that is a trademark of the *porteño* accent as he describes a childhood surrounded by songs. "I grew up listening to music from all over the world," he explains. "I listened to the Beatles endlessly, as well as classical music. And with my friends, we listened to *rock*

nacional. I was in an environment where discovering everything from [French composer] Erik Satie to Brazilian music drove me crazy [with excitement]."

Krygier started playing old-time Argentinian music on recorder from a young age, before graduating to the flute, influenced by Brazilian artists like Hermeto Pascoal. From there, other instruments came naturally.

"I was incorporating new instruments into my music as and when I had new needs," the artist says. "For example, playing with groups that had a powerful sound, the flute wasn't ideal." Formally trained in flute and piano, he now plays a mini orchestra's worth of instruments, including trumpet, saxophone and clarinet, learnt from messing around on a multi-track recorder at home. Yet he remains rather modest – coy even – when it comes to talking about his virtuosity and the number of different instruments he plays. "I don't really feel like saying," he laughs, "because I don't play all the instruments well."

Discussing his music, Krygier chats with an intellectual, almost philosophical pensiveness, no doubt a product of the bohemian environment in which he grew up. His last album *Pesebre* (Spanish for 'cradle' or 'manger'), he says, can be understood on several different levels. The artwork is certainly abstract, featuring a nativity scene with a baby playing a melodica watched by two beaming parents. "There are various

strands that come together in the meaning of the word 'pesebre,' he adds. "On the one hand, one of the themes felt to me like a group of animals singing – a religious choir... On the other hand, there's also a question of family. I wanted to reflect everything I lived in the last few years regarding my parents, who I recently lost. So I wanted to show the happy image of parents with their son."

Listen to the title-track and you get a sense of what he's talking about. The song opens with a rising chorus of programmed sheep bleating, before a hip-hop beat breaks in. Accompanied by a cacophony of sounds, including ringing bicycle bells, a repeated sample in English pontificates about 'sleeping and dying'. One of the album's only instrumental tracks, it's wonderfully weird stuff – catchy, innovative and almost impossible to categorise.

Pesebre is the first album Krygier has recorded for Crammed Discs, the Belgian label who scouted him out after watching him play at a WOMEX event in Recife a couple of years ago. Before going solo at the end of the 90s, Krygier honed his musical chops with band La Portuaria, a group that had considerable success in Argentina and overseas. "The years I spent with them were important," he says, "because I learnt about the dynamic of travelling and living by playing."

Krygier's music comes across as such a distillation of styles that it immediately conjures up images of him as the intrepid musical explorer, foraging Argentina's vast *pampas* and sub-tropical jungles for musical influences. But it turns out he's journeyed little in his homeland, instead soaking up the diverse influences that converge in Buenos Aires. Did he not need to journey the country for inspiration? "I didn't have to look for them [influences]," he answers. "They came to me. I've never been to the north of Argentina, but it came to me when I was 13 years old. A folklore group came to find me because they knew I played the flute. And through them I learnt the secrets – not all of them of course – of Argentinian folklore music."

Small in stature, the musician is a larger-than-life presence on stage.



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The day we speak, Krygier is in town to play a one-off gig at Passing Clouds, a warehouse-cum-nightclub tucked away down a side road in Hackney, east London, that draws an eclectic crowd. As he jerkily taps away on an electronic keyboard, I overhear someone next to me compare him to Tom Waits. At first it seems like an odd comparison – two singers from different cultures who treat very different subject matters. But then it begins to make more sense. Both have this great stage presence – "but a little crazy and prepared to push boundaries. As he makes full use of the vocal distortion effects on his microphone, it feels like a real privilege witnessing something that refuses to make concessions – this was never going to be chart-topping music, but then that would be missing the point.

When asked how well-known he was in Argentina, he replies that, while recognised in alternative music circles, prestige was more important than finding mass appeal anyway. So he'd never be tempted to sing in English in order to reach a larger market? "No, no, no," he answers defiantly. "Listen, you have to express your own culture. I don't get this mainstream thing with Latin American artists like Shakira and Ricky Martin singing in English. What's that all about? To break into 'the market'? Why would I ever need to break into the market?" Krygier doesn't look like he intends to sell-out any time soon – and thank goodness for it. ●

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REVIEW *Axel Krygier's Pesebre was reviewed in #72*

PODCAST *Hear a track from Pesebre on the podcast*

DATE *He plays A Night of Twisted Cumbia with the Mexican Institute of Sound on April 17 at Koko in London as part of La Linea festival*