

KURT MALOO

Back to the future in a *Summer Of Better Times*

Verve Forecast (Universal Music)

One doesn't expect to see the Verve Forecast logo on an album by a Swiss musician, for Verve Forecast is the legendary American Verve label's brand known for its crossover sound of folk, jazz, pop, rock, and experimental music. But Kurt Maloo, a native of Zurich, who now lives in Hamburg, is a citizen of the world, now in good company of such Verve Forecast artists as Jamie Cullum, Elvis Costello, Lizz Wright, Blues Traveler, and Susan Tedeschi. And his new solo album, *Summer Of Better Times*, is a timeless work.

In the 1980s, as one half of the brilliant pop duo Double, he coauthored and sang the most enduring hit Switzerland has ever produced: "The Captain of Her Heart." His new songs are ebullient yet intimate, nostalgic yet forward-looking, with a classic flair. The velvety insistence of Maloo's voice has grown in suggestiveness and seductiveness over the years. This is a mature album, marked by the cheerful nonchalance of a man with nothing more to prove but plenty left to tell.

Poetry seems effortless in his small masterpieces, such as "Day of the Man with a Heart of Gold." The songs always have a cineastic quality that conveys images to the inner eye and tells a story. A daydreamer since childhood, an accomplished painter, Maloo creates his songs out of sequences and pictures.

The songwriter, singer, and guitar player has recorded *Summer Of Better Times* in his Hamburg studio, with assiduous support from members of his live band. His Web links did their bit, too. Playing and singing along were violinist Maria Fausta Rizzo from Messina, and Putokazi, a dazzling female choir from Croatia. They have never met in person, but have exchanged digital files across the small world of the Internet. Why do total strangers spontaneously agree to work together, when Maloo approaches them for collaboration? They are fans of his songs.

Summer Of Better Times is a seamless whole: an unmistakable sound and an unmistakable voice, flattering and challenging, teasing and empowering at the same time. It's not quite nu-jazz or pop or adult contemporary. It is Maloo - Kurt Maloo.

In the mid 1970s, in Zurich, Kurt Maloo stood out not just as a singer and guitar player but as a painter and member of the Performance Art Group MAEZ, the predecessor of the nine piece art-punk cult band Troppo, Maloo's first playground for his songwriting. In the late 1970s, he met drummer Felix Haug at a jam session. The chemistry was right: Maloo and Haug teamed up with bass player Hazel Pazzi to form a trio, Ping Pong.

Soon the group had outgrown the Zurich scene. They were feted at the Montreux Jazz Festival as the next Big Thing. Then the big thing turned into Double - as Haug and Maloo named their new project after Pazzi's departure. Their debut album, *Blue*, became a bestseller first in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, then France, Italy, Spain, and Scandinavia, caught on in England, then the USA, Canada, and South America, finally reaching Asia and Oceania. Their hit single "The Captain of Her Heart" sold millions, and Double went on to sell a million copies of the album. To the industry's bemusement, their second work was titled *Dou3le*-pronounced "double three." Double never did the expected thing, and, after releasing *Dou3le*, Kurt and Felix were already going their separate ways. Sporadic later sessions never led to another joint album.

After the end of Double, Maloo needed a break, to come down to earth. He moved from Zurich to Paris, released a solo album, got married, had a daughter, moved from Paris to Hamburg, had a son, released another solo album. Between raising a family and writing songs, life went on.

In 2006, Maloo's album *Loopy Avenue* explored the impact Double had had on him. Felix Haug had died unexpectedly of a heart attack two years earlier, in 2004. His death prompted Maloo to revisit the past twenty years and take a new look at his own work and that of Double. *Loopy Avenue* was a respectful flashback the artist needed to let go of the past. Now back fully in the here and now, he is looking ahead to an action-packed future as a musician.

"The Captain Of Her Heart" remains a firm favourite and is still part of Maloo's live repertoire. Internationally the most successful Swiss song of all time, it has long been a radio standard from Canada to Kathmandu, and regularly makes it into the jazz and pop download charts throughout the world. The song captures the moment when a woman realizes she can no longer wait for the man who has won her heart, but must move on to a new life, "as the day comes up." This melancholic optimism is central to both Maloo's poetry and his music.

The title song of the new album is the stuff of classic blues. But *Summer Of Better Times* is not about bemoaning the past. "Summer," to Maloo, means a moment charged with longing - it doesn't have to be in the past; it may be yet to come.

Had Double adopted the cool exterior of the 1980s, the "Captain" might not have lasted for as long as it has. But there is a human understanding in the story it tells, which goes straight to the heart and has touched so many. Certainly there are the gentle, velvet echoes of the 1980s pop jazz in *Summer Of Better Times*, yet Kurt Maloo's new songs are never cooled to the point of chill. The fire blazes on, warm and comforting. And his reflection, which keeps these new songs true to life, is always there, cheerful and gracious.

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