

Jim Campilongo

Orange Peels

For lack of a better word, Jim Campilongo's records can be described as "quirky." His playing incorporates everything from Travis- and Atkins-style picking to Roy Buchanan and Jeff Beck volume swells and everything in-between. And it seems he often flies by the proverbial seat of his pants. But with his new record, *Orange*, he took a different tack.

"I planned for months, and I don't usually do that," he said. "I wanted to be comfortable. I wanted to play loud. I wanted to hear the room and not wear headphones. In the past, I spent the least amount of time on the guitar sounds. We'd spend hours on drums, but not guitar. So this time (producer) Anton Fier and I spent a lot of time on what I wanted."

Prior to hitting the studio, Campilongo did a lot of listening to some of the best guitar instrumental records ever recorded, like Jeff Beck's *Blow By Blow*, Howard Roberts' *H.R. is a Dirty Guitar Player*, and Chet Atkins' *A Session with Chet Atkins*. "I told Anton I wanted to make a great record. I don't know if I did, but I tried. At least some of it sounds like it's trying to be great. And I'm proud of that. I wanted urgency and some madness. To some degree, that's missing in some music." With a laugh he adds, "I guess I was really trying to try."

As with all of his records, some song titles bear explanation; "Blues for Roy" is based on Buchanan's "Pete's Blues." "I'm Helen Keller and You're a Waffle Iron" is certainly the oddest title. "A lot of times, I'll think about a song and come up with a title. That one, not to sound too out there, just sort of appeared. I was really proud of the title. I didn't want to offend anybody. It says a lot and is sort of poetic." Mentioning the Beatle-esque "I've Got Blisters on My Fingers" draws a laugh from Campilongo. "I had that in a titles file and I don't even know if it fits that song. It's not really the kind of song that's going to develop any blisters."

Since his move from San Francisco to New York a few years ago, Campilongo has stayed busy. He toured as Martha Wainwright's guitarist last year, and the "sort of" super group Little Willies went back into the studio early this year. "We recorded half a record. It was fantastic; we played a Red Simpson song I swear has the best solo I've played in my life. But, it's only half a record and Norah (Jones) is busy now with her record, so I don't

know where that will go." Campilongo also has weekly gig at the Living Room in New York and continues to teach, both by mail and in-person.

As he gets older, Campilongo enjoys teaching more. "I only have about four students a week, which helps. But as you get older, you realize it's a privilege to share your ideas with somebody who wants to listen." Anybody familiar with his music and playing won't be surprised that the thought of him taking lessons is still on his mind. "One of the good things about playing so long is you *do* know what you don't know. There's so much to learn. You could play guitar for 10 lifetimes and never get the damn thing! It's like 3-D chess. That fingerboard, with all those notes. Lately I've been working on my right-hand technique and realizing it's a mess!"

He's also improving solo playing, and the fruits of his efforts can be heard on the last track of *Orange*, "When You Wish Upon a Star."

"Anton wanted a solo song to finish the record," he said. "I'm always insecure about playing solo, and it makes me a worse guitarist. But I've been working really hard at it. I've got 'Gravy Waltz' worked up, and 'Body and Soul.' So I went back and played 'When You Wish Upon a Star,' and all I can say is I like to make it like the guy didn't get his wish. It's not done cynically, but with hope. He didn't get his wish, but he's okay, because that's life. I really felt like I got it. I did it three times, and surprisingly wasn't nervous."

Fans will soon be able to pick up a Campilongo-signature Fender Telecaster. Fender will release the guitar about the same time the record comes out, and orange is a finish option, just like on the album cover. Campilongo has been using the prototype—a top-loader with jumbo frets—and he hopes people see it simply as a great top-loading Tele. He still uses a '59 Fender Princeton for an amp, a setup he has used for some time.

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Campilongo's stereo is full of music that hints at why his playing is so diverse. "I've been listening to (the experimental late-'60s group) Can, some Norman Blake, a thrash band named Minor Threat, and I've been listening to a record called *Nigeria Special* my bass player got me into. It's singles from 1970 to '76, and it's really cool stuff. Also, John McLaughlin's

"Inner Mounting Flame." Whatever he listens to, listeners know that when he plays guitar, Campilongo sounds like Campilongo. "I guess I have my own style. I never try to do that. I feel like I'm busy trying to learn Wes Montgomery and then I go play and it doesn't sound anything like Wes. But it has allowed me to express myself." — **John Heidt**

Photo: Arthi Krishnaswami.