KAZU – interview by Raffaella Oliva (March 2019)

Mesmerizing is the word for “Adult Baby”, the first solo record by Kazu Makino, to be released on September 13th on Adult Baby Records, her new label. After nine albums with Blonde Redhead, New York based band in which she had accompanied the Italian twins Simone and Amedeo Pace as singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist, the Japanese American artist has plunged into a new musical adventure, and is now prepared to re-present herself to the world in a completely new persona, intimate and totally unique.

In the new tracks of “Adult Baby”, there are echoes of Blonde Redhead here and there, but the record represents Kazu in her purest and most visceral essence. A Kazu wrestling with an existential path on which she embarked towards the end of the summer of 2017, impelled by an almost physiological need, as she explains: «I needed to do an album that was all mine, far from the dynamics intrinsic in being part of a band». She continues, «I was a curious cat, made trips to moon and back a few times». The result is a record that is hard to classify – a guarantee of great value – but that in terms of attitude and sound could be described as rooted in refined, avant-garde pop, in which Kazu’s warm and sensual vocals are the main vehicles that bring to life an ethereal, delicate, dreamy world, and at the same time exhibit a rare intensity, which morphs into episodes of seductive romanticism.

The voice, we were saying: the voice is the true star of “Adult Baby”. And Kazu uses it like an instrument, playing with it, doubling, multiplying it, giving the listener the impression – when she screams piercingly or repeats whispered words like a mantra – that she is in a marvellous trance state, with an urgency that cannot be postponed, nor in any way eluded. «I don’t think of my voice as a singer’s voice», she says, «I don’t even feel like a singer: the only time I sing is when I’ve got a microphone in front of me. Not even when I’m alone, not even in the shower. That’s because I don’t really feel that my voice belongs to me, in the same way I don’t feel my songs are all mine. I don’t think they’re inside me, I think they’re out there, in the air, and what I have to do is to catch them, so that they don’t fly away».

Inspiration is difficult to explain. «It’s almost as if I were able to see a ghost», says Kazu. «When I compose I fall into a certain state and then, at some point, they start to appear, and I have to catch them on the fly to prevent them from disappearing, so I don’t lose them, so they don’t go back to their invisible state. And to catch them, you can’t take notes for later or anything like that: no, you have to stay there and record». That’s what she did to create “Adult Baby”, an album she co-produced with Sam Griffin Owens, with special guests like the great Ryūichi Sakamoto, the Brazilian percussionist Mauro Refosco and the acclaimed drummer Ian Chang, supported by a full formation orchestra. A surprising journey in sound, based on an intriguing mix of synthesizers, moog, loops, percussion, snippets of piano and grand melodic orchestral breaks that remind the listener of Serge Gainsbourg and the soundtracks of certain Italian movies from the Sixties. It’s no use fighting it: once you have set foot on the planet Kazu, you are immersed in otherness. And that otherness bears her signature. «From a merely technical standpoint, it isn’t a complicated record. Actually, I tried to keep it simple», says the singer. «But conceptually it’s a sophisticated and also free. I think it is unique. There are some classic pop passages, but they blend with a very primitive side of me».

It was a challenge that Kazu decided she had to tackle. The root was an inner malaise. «At one point I understood that I needed some rest», she explains. «When you stop you always risk losing something, but the need was so pressing that in September 2017 I left my house in New York, where I was no longer healthy, with the air so polluted that I had developed respiratory problems, and found refuge in Tuscany, on the island of Elba, in the middle of the sea, where nature is lovely in a gentle, mild way. the moment I got there I began to feel calm, protected, safe». Shortly thereafter, Elba became her new realm. «At the moment my house is there, in Capoliveri: that’s where I wrote the tracks for “Adult Baby”. It all flowed so naturally, I don’t think I’ve ever made a record with such serenity: I’ve always suffered a bit over music, but this time I felt different, as if I’d started living again. Maybe the best is yet to come, I told myself».

That best would be well deserved. During her career, which has spanned nearly three decades, Kazu Makino has penetrated the collective imagination of a planetary underground, which in the United States and the Old Continent, in Latin America as in the Middle East, has seen in her an artist of unusual quality, with a special personality and taste. A fascinating and talented woman, delicate yet strong, over the years Kazu has witnessed the changes in the music business while remaining true to herself, with an attitude that insists on freedom of action and doesn’t take notice of trends, and to a natural image of herself, a refined femininity. Over time she has become an icon of elegant rock, adored in equal measure by men and women and considered one of the best female vocalists on the alternative scene. Over the years she has collaborated with The Black Heart Procession, Beach Fossils, Battles, TV On The Radio, Trentemøller, Liars, Nosaj Thing. And she is a style icon, too: because of her passion for fashion that is never banal and doesn’t care about last-minute trendiness; because of her taste, which onstage translates into a look consisting of clothing she has often reinvented and silky-smooth fabrics: mini dresses, sequin pants, Victorian blouses, backless dresses, jumpsuits, military jackets, overalls and mesh tops are the trappings of a captivating performer, a mysterious and charismatic figure from who knows where, with a wild and yet so aristocratic spirit.

Whatever field she enters, Kazu embraces and has always embraced an artistic approach. The same approach with which she composed and created “Adult Baby”. «The title came to me when an old friend told me about the existence of so-called “adult baby club”, frequented by powerful men who go there to be treated like small children». She continues, «This discovery struck me, perhaps because I am convinced that in a way, we are all adult babies, that many people feel that way inside and that they identify with this expression. Each in his own way: “Adult Baby” is a title that can be taken in many ways; some will think it curious, others erotic, others still strange or tender: it all depends on how you see it».

The lyrics of the songs speak of intimate relationships, friendships, love, relations in which trust is lost, but in the end regained. They also speak of a transitory stage, in which Kazu put part of her personal history behind her, in search of a new perspective that would allow her to rediscover herself. «When you first start making music, if you manage to put together a fanbase, you start to think “what do these people want, anyway?” Or at least, that’s how it was for me. As time passes, however, you become dependent on the plaudits, the compliments, the love the fans have for you, and you can become convinced that your value as an artist corresponds solely to what others think of you». She continues, «Being an artist is also about this, becoming the music you make, but if you are the music you make, when someone criticize the music, it’s you who feels the pain. It’s a dangerous trap, mentally, but although I fell into it, I tried to find a way out, and to free myself I went to live in a place where none of it matters, to write and realize the solo record and let my weakness make me stronger».

That fragility became a resource, giving rise to the tracks of “Adult Baby”. «I think the inspiration surfaced on the island of Elba in part because it was a place I knew, the place filled with only good memories», Kazu observes. «It was there that Amedeo (the guitarist and second voice of Blonde Redhead, who was Makino’s life partner in the past, ed. note) and I had become a couple, many years ago. We had met in New York, and fell in love, but then I had gone back to Japan and he had left for Elba, where he had a summer job, and we kept on writing to one another, until finally he asked me to join him there. It was my first time in Italy». Born and raised in Kyoto, the Japanese musician had flown to the Big Apple when still in her teens. «I was 18 and had just enrolled at university in Tokyo». It was the American John Lurie (painter, musician and actor in several of Jim Jarmush’s films, director and producer and ex leader of The Lounge Lizards) who convinced her, after he spotted her in the Japanese capital, to drop everything and go to live in New York. «It was thanks to him that I met Amedeo and Simone: he suggested I collaborate with them», Kazu recalls. «At first I was perplexed, because they were into jazz, but we all know how it turned out». She left a host of memories behind. «The Bach and Mozart pieces my father listened to 24/7, incessantly, at low volume. My first piano and violin lessons, at elementary school. All girls band with some friends in junior high school; I just sang, we did simple bluesy pop songs». And her mother: «She has had problems, there was violence at home. I was always seen as an encumbrance, interfering with the relationship between my parents, who are in symbiosis today just as they were then: there is no space between them. I had a very rough childhood: it may have been the most dangerous time of my life».

It’s surprising to hear her say that, considering the accident she had horseback riding in 2002, even harder for her since she loves horses so much. But she fell, unexpectedly, and broke her mandible and facial bones, which required several operations to reconstruct them, and could not sing for an extended period. But she kept at it and during that period she wrote with Amedeo and Simone “Misery Is A Butterfly”, the trio’s masterpiece, dated 2004. And now she has won another bet with herself: Miss Makino is reborn, and in this sense “Adult Baby” is also a tale of transition. It’s no coincidence that the record will be accompanied by a visual album directed by Eva Michon, shot on the island of Elba, between Capoliveri and Portoferraio: against a background of beaches and villages of brightly painted houses, the songwriter is presented as a mythological figure, a sea creature with human features, ready to return to Earth, but also to dive back into the depths of the ocean. Kazu wrote the screen play with the director, and the soundtrack consists of the tracks of “Adult Baby”, with the raw material drawn from the visions of a full-on artist, who for her solo debut has decided to convert the metaphors, symbolism and the magical world hidden between the lines and notes of her songs into images.

«I live in my inner world, in my fantasies. I’m not a pragmatic person, and I don’t let reality affect me all that much. I was like that as a child, too, it’s a part of my personality that is very much in line with the rituals typical of Japan, like the tea ceremony and Ikebana, ancient traditions I learned all about in Kyoto». It is the grown-up child, the childlike adult in her that speaks. A woman who is now following a new path, fully independent, freer than she has ever been before. An ‘adult baby’ who goes looking for stimuli and returns with her hands full. She has the determination of someone who intends to leave a mark. And she is irresistible.