

Whitaker's Swing-Centric Vision

AT A RECORDING SESSION, NOTHING'S MORE BENEFICIAL than good interpersonal vibes. That's joyfully evident on Rodney Whitaker's eighth album as a leader, *When We Find Ourselves Alone* (Mack Avenue). Contrary to the album's title, the bassist surrounded himself with close friends and family, resulting in a hard-swinging session brimming with heart.

Whitaker has dubbed his band Soul-R Energy. Drummer Greg Hutchinson and saxophonist Antonio Hart go way back with the bassist, working together with trumpeter Roy Hargrove in the early '90s. "We came of age together in that band," Whitaker said. Pianist Bruce Barth also shares

Avenue SuperBand, an ensemble of label all-stars. The recently released *Live From The Detroit Jazz Festival-2013* captures their third dynamic appearance at that event.

In his music and in his life, this vibrant bandleader reveres tradition yet embraces the new.

Your new album kicks off with good-time, straightahead swing. As the disc progresses, there are rhythmic explorations within that classic sound. Explain the time signature on "Invitation."

You can look at it two ways: it's either 2 against 3, or it could be 5/8 against 4. But I look at all music as swing. Whether it's funk, whether it's in 7 or 9, it all swings. I played with Wynton. He's my friend and I learned a lot from him. But I don't look at swing as just the 4/4 rhythm we play. *All* the music we play swings.

Your take on Max Roach's "Freedom Day" is an intense centerpiece of the new album. That song, from 1960, still packs a wallop today, both musically and politically. Several tracks on your album hold political messages.

We can't forget that it's still our responsibility to voice that music, especially in the African-American community. Musicians have to be a mirror. John F. Kennedy said that it's important to accept the artist's rightful place to critique the world. It's our job to look at things and if there's something wrong, it's our responsibility to tell everyone.

On that track, you lay down one of *the* most harrowing fast tempos in walking-bass history.

Oh, man! Growing up in Detroit, it's a hard-butt town and you have to be able to play fast. If you can't play fast growing up here, the older cats won't respect you. When Hutch and I were with Roy [Hargrove] as youngsters, we always committed ourselves and encouraged the band to play fast. Because if you don't walk fast, you lose it.

What sets Detroit apart from other urban music scenes?

In Detroit, you grow up very aware of the legacy of your town. In New Orleans and Chicago, that's similar. But Detroit musicians are uniquely proud of being from that town. I started playing jazz because a neighbor saw me carrying my upright bass home, and he made me know how important it was that I was part of a *legacy*—informed me about Paul Chambers and Ron Carter. That neighbor gave me a jazz album and that was *it!* That music filled a void; I was always looking for something like that but I didn't know what it was. I looked up the word *legacy* that day and saw that it meant "a continuum, a tradition." And I wanted to be a part of tradition.

A lovely, intimate moment is your duet sement with your daughter on "Autumn Leaves." Is that a peek into what goes on in your seven-children household?

In our house, everyone's a musician. We've got a 5-year-old, a 27-year-old [Fortin] and every age in between. I have a son who plays guitar and a daughter who's a drummer, so we find ourselves jamming a lot. My wife sings and she directed a gospel choir. There's always harmonizing going on in our household.

The gospel finale, "Lost In You Again," focuses on the spiritual aspect of the disc.

That's the center. I grew up in an African-American church and that's always been an important thing in my life. My first two records had Christian themes. It's a way to say, "Hey, life is not just about playing music and doing shows." We all struggle with that. We get busy. That's the point of the song: I look to be lost in God again and keeping that at the center of everything I do—whether it's family or home or how I deal with people out in the world. That tune was the conclusion of our album; it was like an altar call. It's about life and love and encouraging everybody to go on.

—Jeff Potter



tight bonds, having toured with Whitaker in trumpeter Terence Blanchard's quintet from 1989-'91. The newcomer on the album—making an impressive recording debut—is Whitaker's daughter Rockelle Fortin, who contributes vocals.

Whitaker spent six years in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra before leaving in 2003. Lessons he learned from the orchestra's managing and artistic director, Wynton Marsalis, continue to influence his work today.

In addition to his hectic performing schedule, Whitaker is director of jazz studies at Michigan State University and musical director of the Mack