

JUDY NIEMACK on *BLUE NIGHTS*

(Blujazz Productions BJ3353)

When I was 21 I left sunny Pasadena for the mean streets of the Bronx with the goal to become a jazz singer. "Blue Nights" looks back at where I've been. Listening to great musicians night after night at Bradley's or the Vanguard, absorbing the excitement and sound of the best jazz players, later making music with many of them, falling in love with the Great American Songbook and seeking to go beyond it: "Blue Nights" distills that journey while looking to the future.

Belgian guitarist Jeanfrancois Prins, who co-produced the album and arranged most of the songs, brought a modern jazz approach to standards like "Lullaby of the Leaves" and "Night In Tunisia." His concise charts highlight the lyrics and enable the band to often sound like more than just two horns, guitar and rhythm section. I love improvising on chord progressions and enjoy the challenge of negotiating complex harmonic structures, so his arrangements are perfect for me.

"Blue Nights" was conceived as a concert set, with the varied moods, interaction and energy of a "live" performance. Nothing compares with the joy of improvising with fellow musicians on the same wavelength, and in this band the combination of risk-taking and trust resulted in real communication...what jazz is all about. This is my ode to jazz: a celebration of its blues roots and the midnight hours when "the cares of the day seem to vanish" and music reigns.

1. "I Ain't got Nothin' but the Blues" - We tiptoe into the blues, with Dennis setting up a serious groove on the bass. Jim contributes a classic blues solo, and the whole thing goes out with a roar. Jeanfrancois' arrangement inspired by Mose Allison's classic rendition, reflects the wry humor of the lyric.

2. "Bluesette" - Toots Thielemans, Jeanfrancois' musical Godfather in Belgium, describes this as a combination of a "musette" and a "blues". We loved Toots' Brazilian version, so Jeanfrancois added a vocal/guitar duo chorus and away we went! Thanks to their friendship, Toots has become my friend as well, and I'm delighted to include this tribute to him.

3. "Blue" - Joni Mitchell's "Blue" touched me when it first came out. I was a teenager, with friends who'd been sidetracked and waylaid by drugs. The lush textures and intricate interweaving of the saxophone and guitar reflect the multi-layered perceptions of a state of heightened reality, when every experience is new and intense.

4. "Interplay" - I love the Baroque quality of Bill Evans' composition and the classical sound of the contrapuntal bass and guitar lines. My lyrics explore the interplay between light and dark, silence and sound, between opposites...the interplay of love. Dennis is featured and elucidates the subject with élan.

5. "Moanin'" - I've sung this for years and I never tire of it. With three former members of Blakey's band -- Don Sickler, Gary Bartz and Dennis Irwin -- it was bound to groove hard. Don's cool, complex solo paves the way for Gary's searing lines, and Jeanfrancois captures the freewheeling energy of his live playing. I finish by trading 4's with Victor, a master of melodious drum solos.

6. "Blue In Green" - This gentle *bossa nova* evokes the tranquility of standing in waves of blue and green. I added two beats to suggest the pause at a wave's crest before it breaks. Jim's solo, a thing of lyrical beauty with a touch of the blues, concludes with a tip of the hat to Bill Evans. Then skies grow cloudy, a storm approaches and the waves toss us about. We drift away on the current, hoping to find our way back home.

7. "Misterioso" - Thelonious Monk was a revelation to me. After studying with saxophonist Warne Marsh, focusing on the complex lines and intellectual approach of Lennie Tristano, Monk's harmonic angularity and melodic brilliance attracted me. The lyrics are my tribute to his genius, as well as to the difficulty of singing piano lines! I asked Gary to solo because, like Monk, he plays the truth.

8. "Lullaby of the Leaves" - On this track, Jeanfrancois invokes the rustling leaves of a warm Southern evening with a sinuous bass line and funky groove.. The guitar solo twists and turns in the breeze, swinging hard then gently settling down to a slow burn, and a chorus of sirens invites you to dream.

9. "In a Sentimental Mood" sounds nearly classical at the beginning, with close horn and guitar voicings evolving into pure jazz. The key change on the bridge sheds new light on Ellington's ultimate romantic ballad. Gary's bebop and blues-tinged solo tells a beautiful story and Jeanfrancois continues the tale, illuminating the lyrics in the final chorus.

10. "A Night in Tunisia" - Jeanfrancois' arrangement begins softly -- with the voice and guitar vamping in a minimalist duet -- and builds from there. Starting out with an Afro-Cuban groove, each section describes a different harmonic and/or rhythmic evolution in jazz. The first interlude features the original "Tunisia" break, but in an odd-meter, leading into my solo. The second interlude quotes "Manteca" and it's Jim's turn. By the time the guitar solo hits, the band is playing a burning double time, returning to the original groove at the end. Once you know it, it's easy!

11. "Afro Blue" - Inspired by African Pygmy singing and Coltrane's version of this tune, I layered my voice with Gary Bartz's sax lines, shifting between different time signatures for the melody. Victor Lewis conjured up a powerful groove that lifted us up and let the solos fly. Oscar Brown, Jr.'s lyric is about the deepest roots of jazz, and although I am not of African descent in this lifetime, I am inextricably connected to that spirit through the music.

12. "All Blues" - Miles Davis' classic cool blues from *Kind of Blue* never ceases to inspire jazz improvisers. We opened up the solos like we would in concert. Oscar Brown Junior's lyric tells stories of blues of every shade and hue....

