

# FOURPLAY

## Profile

For two decades, the contemporary jazz quartet known as Fourplay has enjoyed consistent artistic and commercial success by grafting elements of R&B, pop and a variety of other sounds to their unwavering jazz foundations. In the course of a dozen recordings – six of which have climbed to the top of *Billboard*'s Contemporary Jazz Album charts – the supergroup has continued to explore the limitless dimensions and permutations of jazz while at the same time appealing to a broad mainstream audience.

The Fourplay story begins in 1990, with keyboardist Bob James, who had already established himself as a formidable figure in keyboard jazz – not just as an instrumentalist but as a composer and arranger as well – with solo recordings dating as far back as the mid 1960s. In 1990, James reunited with his old friend, session drummer, producer, composer & recording artist Harvey Mason (Herbie Hancock, Barbra Streisand, Notorious Big), during the recording of James' *Grand Piano Canyon* album. Also involved in the project were guitarist Lee Ritenour (Sergio Mendes) and bassist/vocalist Nathan East (Barry White, Eric Clapton, Phil Collins).

The *Grand Piano Canyon* sessions marked the genesis of the group that eventually came to be known as Fourplay. Their self-titled debut album was released in 1991, and included a blend of jazz, R&B and pop.

The original lineup of James/Ritenour/East/Mason stayed together for three successive albums, including *Elixir* (1994), a set that features some high-profile guest vocalists: Phil Collins, Patti Austin and Peabo Bryson. East also delivers some noteworthy vocal contributions on *Elixir*, and has continued to do so throughout most of Fourplay's subsequent studio outings.

Ritenour, whose guitar work in tandem with James' keyboards served as the cornerstone of the early Fourplay sound, left the lineup in the mid-1990s and was replaced by Larry Carlton (The Crusaders, Joni Mitchell, Quincy Jones). Carlton made his first studio appearance with the band with the release of *4* in 1998. *4* included compositions by all four members, as well as an impressive crew of guest vocalists: El Debarge, Babyface Edmonds, Kevyn Lettau and Shanice.

Following the 1999 release of *Snowbound*, a mix of traditional and contemporary holiday songs, Fourplay shook things up a bit with *Yes Please!*, an album that challenged the standard definitions of contemporary jazz by incorporating elements of blues, funk and even Celtic music. *JazzTimes* critic Hilarie Grey called *Yes Please!* "an expansive album that incorporates each artist's strengths, and in the process travels in some unexpected directions." Grey added: "*Yes Please!* works where similar projects fail simply because it lets its artists play, without imposing artificial boundaries."

The sense of experimentation continued with the 2002 release of *Heartfelt*. The material in this set emerged from a series of improvisational performances that were assembled into full compositions. As a result, the tunes have less clearly defined melodies, but the overall album is both exploratory and accessible at the same time.

*Journey*, released in 2004, is a laid-back affair, but complex at the same time. Consistent with Fourplay's eclectic philosophy, *Journey* incorporates a range of stylistic elements – as evidenced by such high points as the delicate cover of the 1993 Sting hit “Fields of Gold” and the Mason bossa nova flavored “Rozil.”

*X* followed in 2006, with guest vocals by blue-eyed-soul icon Michael McDonald, who delivers an inspired rendition of Steve Winwood's “My Loves Leavin'.” *JazzTimes* called *X* “a softly funky, superbly crafted and unapologetically low-key album.”

Fourplay joined the prestigious roster of artists on Heads Up International, a division of Concord Music Group, with the 2008 release of *Energy*, which spent three consecutive weeks at the top of *Billboard*'s Contemporary Jazz chart. The album grafts a variety of sounds – R&B, pop, African and more – to Fourplay's unwavering jazz foundations. In addition to vocals by East, *Energy* features a vocal track by bassist Esperanza Spalding.

After 12 years with the group, Carlton left in April 2010 to delve further into his solo career, and the band welcomed its newest member, multi-faceted virtuoso guitarist, Chuck Loeb. His musical contributions undoubtedly enhance the creativity and pursuit of excellence Fourplay has enjoyed in the studio and on the stage.

Loeb makes his highly anticipated debut with the quartet on *Let's Touch The Sky*, the band's new recording scheduled for release in October 2010. The album also includes thrilling performances by guest vocalists Anita Baker and Ruben Studdard.

The infusion of new blood into the Fourplay lineup creates an opportunity to bring an even higher level of energy and inspiration into a band that is already known for taking chances and pushing the limits of contemporary jazz. “All four of us have been in this business long enough to know that there's always pressure to compromise, and we don't want to do that,” says James. “We don't want to end up in the middle of the pack. We always aim to be leaders, and take the music to another level and raise the standards higher. I think the music on this new record, thanks in large part to Chuck's early contributions – and to the ongoing team spirit of the band as a whole – is very much a reflection of that philosophy.”

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