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NAJEE EXERCISES *MIND OVER MATTER* ON NEW HEADS UP RELEASE

Includes guest appearances by Eric Benét and Jeff Lorber

Sometimes making music is all about the mechanics – balancing the melody with the harmony and the rhythm, making sure the tempo is right from the beginning of the song to the end, matching the right vocalist to the story within the lyrics, knowing when to come in with the solos and when to hang back...the litany of technical details to consider in crafting a piece of good music can be endless.

But sometimes the process is much more intuitive and effortless. Sometimes the planets line up and the right groove emerges on its own, and all anyone needs to do – musicians and listeners alike – is get on board and ride into a realm of limitless possibilities.

That intuitive approach is at the heart of *Mind Over Matter* (HUCD 3156), the new recording by saxophonist Najee set for release on August 25, 2009, on Heads Up International, a division of Concord Music Group. In addition to Najee's fine balance of songcraft and musicianship, the album also includes songwriting and guest appearances by keyboardist Jeff Lorber and vocalists Eric Benét and Gary Taylor.

The album title, says Najee, is inspired by Miles Davis' approach to songwriting, especially in the latter part of his career. "In his later years, he took a very loose and improvisational approach," he says. "He would start with nothing more than a groove that Marcus Miller or some other member of his band would lay down. And from there he would just develop these melodies that were very simple but at the same time very compelling and very memorable. It was a creative process that bypassed the nuts and bolts of the song and just got right to the essence of it."

It's not hard to find the groove in *Mind Over Matter*. It's evident from the opening bars of the midtempo "Love You a Lifetime," a song that positions Najee's smoky sax lines alongside the solid horn arrangements charted by fellow saxophonist Will Holton (who

also shares the writing credit with Najee on the track). “This song has a bit of the neo-soul element,” says Najee. “That’s a groove that works very well when we play live. People love to get up and dance at our shows. Will was able to bring that spirit to this song.”

The upbeat followup track, “Sweet Summer Nights,” is co-written by Najee and Darren Rahn, “one of the most under-utilized songwriters in this genre,” according to Najee. “He’s a well-kept secret who has written for Wayman Tisdale and many others. He’s very good at writing songs that contemporary jazz radio likes to play.”

Equally upbeat and breezy is the title track, a composition that showcases not only Najee’s ability to build a sophisticated solo on a simple riff, but also the engaging solo work of keyboardist and track co-writer Will Brock.

Eric Benét provides some whimsical and suggestive vocals on “We Gone Ride,” a track that balances his distinctive voice with the work of a carefully layered horn section. “When I recorded that song with Eric, he said to me, ‘I had Roy Hargrove do the original horn arrangement.’ Then producer Demonte Posey and saxophonist Mike Parlett (Solar Radio) took Roy’s charts, made some modifications and came up with the arrangement you hear on this track. It’s complex, but it allows plenty of room for everyone in the section – Mike on tenor and alto, John Papenbrook on trumpet and Andrew Lipman on trombone.”

“The Journey,” co-written by Najee and pianist Darryl Woodson, is a gentle, introspective piece that sets up a softer dimension to the overall recording. “That’s a song that follows a very simple melody, but it speaks a lot in terms of how it comes across,” says Najee. “The track is so full of opportunities for a soloist, and I had to control my urge to play all over it. For me, it is the most personal song on this record. One take, and that was it.”

Jeff Lorber lends a hand with writing/producing and keyboards on the playful “Stolen Glances” and the insistent “One More Thing.” Although they’ve shared numerous festival dates in recent years, *Mind Over Matter* was the first opportunity for Najee and Lorber to collaborate in the studio. “I ended up spending a lot of time at Jeff’s house and recording there,” says Najee. “I really didn’t expect to spend as much time working with him there as I did, but we ended up having a lot of fun with these songs. We recorded six to seven ideas and ended up with these two”.

Laid back and easygoing, “Moon Over Carolina” closes the set with mellow vocals by Gary Taylor – who also provides all instrumentation aside from Najee’s saxophone work. “Gary’s a very prolific R&B writer who has written with Anita Baker and Will Downing,” says Najee. “He brings that same great R&B sound to this song as well.”

Whatever the groove – be it R&B, neo-soul, contemporary jazz or an intriguing blend of all these styles and more – *Mind Over Matter* adds another layer of sophistication and polish to Najee’s substantial and diverse body of work. “Whenever I go into the studio, I try to

make a record that's a little different from the last one," he says. "I want people to get the same Najee that they're familiar and comfortable with, but at the same time, I want them to hear something fresh, something interesting, something unpredictable – with a couple extra voices in the mix that they haven't heard on my records in the past."

Dig into the groove that is uniquely Najee's. Experience *Mind Over Matter*.

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