



Ramsey Lewis to Release Concord Jazz Debut,
Songs From the Heart: Ramsey Plays Ramsey,
Available September 29

On September 29, Concord Jazz will release *Songs From the Heart: Ramsey Plays Ramsey*, the debut Concord Jazz CD from iconic pianist/bandleader Ramsey Lewis. At the age of 74, Ramsey Lewis has not only continued to be active in the jazz world, but he's also forging ahead with a newly inspired creative instinct as a composer. This re-envisioned artistic sensibility is showcased on his new album, which is a remarkable, refined collection of 12 new originals that he composed over a period of two years. The collection includes music from two commissioned world premiere performances at the Ravinia Festival in Highland Park, Illinois, just north of Chicago. Eight songs come from the score of 2007's ballet *To Know Her...* written for the Joffrey Ballet Company and four pieces come from 2008's *Muses and Amusements* suite performed with the Turtle Island Quartet.

Songs From the Heart, Lewis' first trio recording in five years, features eight pieces with bassist Larry Gray and drummer Leon Joyce, and four piano solo performances. To Lewis, the CD marks a turning point in his storied career: he's found new life as a composer.

"Initially nothing was compelling me to go into the studio," says the three-times-Grammy-winner Lewis, who in addition to his 80-plus album career (seven went gold) is also a Chicago-based radio personality and host of the PBS TV series *Legends of Jazz*. "But since I'd been composing so much and people were responding positively to the new songs, I decided to do an entire album of my own material instead of recording music by other artists."

In regards to his newfound love of composing, he adds, "I'm like a kid on Christmas morning all over again. For me, it's all about the music. It's what makes me sleep well and jump out of bed in the morning to work on new melodies. I can't wait."

Lewis says that his early hits—most prominently his mid-'60s international breakout tunes "The 'In' Crowd," "Hang on Sloopy" and "Wade in the Water"—in some ways spoiled him. "Darn those hits," he says jokingly. "In the early days with the trio I wrote more, but once you get so popular you tend to get a little lazy. It comes to a point where you compose three or four songs for a new album, then one or two seems to suffice."

In 2006, Welz Kauffman, the president/CEO of Ravinia, suggested that Lewis, the jazz artistic director there, compose a score for the Joffrey. The pianist met with the ballet company's then- executive director Jon Teeuwissen and then set forth to work on an

hour's worth of material. He was in for a rude awakening. "I sat down at the piano and all I could think of was Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev and music for classical ballet," he says. "As I sat at the piano with no ideas, my wife Jan told me, 'I'm hearing you and you're suffering. Why don't you just turn on a tape recorder and play?' I told her, 'But I'm trying to compose.'"

However, Lewis took her advice and began to discover melodies as he improvised. His breakthrough song is the CD's leadoff track, the lyrical "To Know Her Is to Love Her." More tunes quickly followed even without using the tape recorder ("It was almost like writing shorthand," says Lewis), and he presented the eight compositions to Joffrey choreographer Donald Byrd. "He liked my old hits, but he had nothing but superlatives for the new material," says Lewis, who notes that one tune, "Clouds in Reverie," was a version of a piece written for the previous year's Ravinia project, *One Score, One Chicago: New Scenes From Childhood*.

Joffrey choreography began in April 2007 for the June 2007 performance. A month before the premiere Lewis saw his first rehearsal. The troupe put his recorded demos on and began to dance. "The way they moved brought tears to my eyes," says Lewis. "When I started out in bands when I was 16, people danced to our music. This took me back 50 years, and here I was writing for dancing again."

At Ravinia, the performance garnered a rousing applause from the audience and critical plaudits from the press. Lewis says, "My son pointed out to me that this was the first concert of mine he had seen that got a standing ovation without me having to play the hits. That told me something about focusing more intently on composition."

Kauffman was so impressed that he immediately commissioned Lewis to write new works for Ravinia in 2008. He decided to compose for a string quartet to accompany his trio. On the recommendation of his good friend and fellow pianist Dr. Billy Taylor, Lewis enlisted the Turtle Island Quartet to perform a suite of eight new originals, including the relaxed-swinging "The Spark" and the bowed ballad "The Conversation." Of the former, Lewis says, "I like the energy in this song. I was thinking of a groove—not rock, but something that had an element of excitement and forward motion while at the same time was melodic."

From the ballet score, Lewis explains that the emotive tune "Touching, Feeling, Knowing" is based on a folk melody he heard when he visited Soweto, South Africa. "It's a simple melody that I used as the basis for this song. When we play it, it reminds me of South Africa." In regards to the appropriately titled "The Way She Smiles," Lewis says, "That's one of those songs that just happened. I woke up one morning and was thinking of a New Orleans groove."

One of the added bonuses of Lewis' prolific writing has been an enrichment of his pianistic talent. "The composing has informed my playing," says Lewis. "I'm looking at harmony and melody in a different way. I've noticed that my solos have become deeper and more contemplative." On *Songs From the Heart*, Lewis takes the solo spotlight four times, including the film noir-ish "Long Before She Knew" and reflective muse "The Glow of Her Charm."

The latter arrived when Lewis was working on an intro to the song “In the Still of the Night” that he was performing one evening in Washington, D.C. He was in his hotel room on a grand piano, determined to find a prelude. Once again, his wife offered her wisdom. “Jan was listening to me and said, ‘What’s that? That’s a song, not an introduction. You’ve got a new song.’ And, if course, she was right.”

On *Songs From the Heart*, Lewis offers graceful music, played with a light, gentle, joyful touch, and focused on melody. Writing in the CD liner notes, Lewis pointed out that in the CD’s initial planning stages, all artistic and record company parties agreed that *Songs From the Heart* should be characterized by “heartfelt, lyrical and inspirational” music “that my fans had come to expect.”

In the liners, Lewis also noted, “Our desire was to convey a sense of beauty, joy, simplicity and lyricism...I am extremely proud of the results.” He adds, “Looking back at all the music that I’ve written over the last few years, I think I’m coming up with something unique. I think I’m developing a style.”

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