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SPYRO GYRA RINGS IN THE HOLIDAY SEASON

A Night Before Christmas due in stores September 23, 2008

As the seasons change and the end of the year draws near, even the most forward thinking and cutting-edge artists take a nostalgic moment to count their blessings. Spyro Gyra has spent more than three decades pushing the boundaries and definitions of jazz beyond the commonly accepted parameters. In so doing, they continue to forge an edgy, enduring sound that incorporates some of the best elements of jazz and merges them with R&B, pop, Latin and various other styles.

But it isn't always about breaking new ground. All five of these talented innovators – saxophonist Jay Beckenstein, pianist Tom Schuman, guitarist Julio Fernandez, bassist Scott Ambush and drummer Bonny B – agree that there's a time and a place for reconnecting with tradition and celebrating the fundamental values at the core of their music and their lives.

This year, Spyro Gyra celebrates the holiday season with *A Night Before Christmas* (HUCD 3145), a collection of eleven tracks that capture the yuletide spirit with a decidedly traditional jazz vibe.

“We've always had a yearning to do a record that was kind of a straightahead record – or at least something closer to a straightahead record than what we normally do,” says Beckenstein. “But it's always been very difficult to make that work in the context of what we do on most of our records. But a Christmas record was sort of an opportunity to really go someplace a little more subtle, a little more acoustic and more traditional.”

Beckenstein brings his own perspective to the project. “Christmas has always been a huge part of my life,” he says. “There's so much about it that's universal, separate and apart from the religious aspects. It's a celebration of all the things that are good and redeeming about humanity – compassion, hope, generosity, forgiveness, renewal, family, all those things.”

The traditional “O Tannenbaum” opens the set with an improvisational vibe. “It was set up as kind of a jam, and it went to some nice places,” says Beckenstein. “It sounds sort of contemporary, without really losing the acoustic feel of the song.”

Tony Award winning vocalist Christine Ebersole delivers a simple and pure rendition of “It Won’t Feel Like Christmas,” a new song that is destined to become a Christmas classic. “These days families are often so far apart physically and then there are people like us who travel for a living. It’s important to get home, to *be* home. Then there are the folks who just aren’t going to get home, like the situation a lot of military families are finding themselves these past few years.”

No Christmas music is complete without bells, and guest vibraphonist Dave Samuels – founder of the acclaimed Caribbean Jazz Project – evokes the sound of holiday chimes on two tracks, “Winter Wonderland” and “Carol of the Bells” (the latter includes engaging phrases and snippets of the timeless traditional “What Child Is This” and Rodgers & Hammerstein’s “My Favorite Things”).

Guest vocalist Janis Siegel – a founding member of Manhattan Transfer – joins drummer Bonny B on the mischievous Frank Loesser wintertime duet, “Baby It’s Cold Outside.” Beckenstein recalls: “We wanted to go in sort of an Ella Fitzgerald direction, and that’s Janis’ turf big-time. She just does it so beautifully. When we got her into the studio, it was a breeze. The song is very much about projecting a personality, and Janis has personality to burn. She brings all kinds of fun and spunk to this track.”

If Christmas is about tradition, then Spyro Gyra has tied both together in a festive package. “There’s something about traditional jazz that harkens back to my childhood,” says Beckenstein. “On top of that, I have many nostalgic memories of Christmas. The holiday, and this kind of music, have created some of the fondest memories of my youth. These connections make this a very heartfelt record for me and for everyone in the band.”

Put another log on the fire. *A Night Before Christmas* might well be the best musical moment of this holiday season.

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