

THE RIPPINGTONS

Modern Art

A quick Google search of the term *Modern Art* clues in contemporary jazz fans everywhere just why it's the perfect title for The Rippingtons' latest release on Peak Records, and reflective of band founder Russ Freeman's creative mindset as he leads the pioneering band in blazing new trails at the start of their incredible third decade: "It is usually associated with art in which the traditions of the past have been cast aside in a spirit of experimentation, associated with new ways of seeing and fresh ideas about the functions of art."

The Rippingtons spent the summer of 2006 and much of the past two years celebrating that past and toasting the future with what Freeman jokingly calls "the longest and greatest 20th Anniversary tour in history." They embarked on the extended journey upon the release of *The Rippingtons 20th Anniversary*, the remarkable 2006 CD/DVD package featuring a retrospective DVD, new music and a medley of their most popular airplay hits since the release of their debut album *Moonlighting* in 1986. While the demand for more shows means that Ripps enthusiasts have had to wait longer than usual (two and a half years) for the band's follow-up, the extra time and ongoing slate of live concerts allowed Freeman and his explosive new lineup (including powerful new bassist Rico Belled and special guest, returning saxophonist Jeff Kashiwa) the extraordinary opportunity to work out the new material on *Modern Art* and let the songs evolve in front of the audiences' eyes.

"Writing is always a very organic process for me," says Freeman, who wrote most of the collection's tracks in early 2008, "and spending so much of the spring, summer and fall on the road meant that I had more time to live with the songs and let them develop naturally. The time between writing and recording is usually much shorter, but this time the band had a lot of time to work with the tunes and help them evolve in some amazing ways. It was also the first time ever I recorded all of my acoustic and electric guitar parts first, which allowed us to interact in the studio the way we do onstage. This new approach allowed them to respond more spontaneously to my playing at a higher intuitive level than they ever could on any previous album—and we're talking 18 albums since the late 80's!"

Freeman has particularly high praise for Kashiwa, whose original stint with the band was from 1990-99. He again toured with The Ripps for the first leg of the 20th Anniversary Tour and continues as a special guest, in addition to his solo career and as a member of the group Sax Attack. The sax man's exciting performances on *Modern Art* mark his first full-fledged immersion on Ripps project since 1997's *Black Diamond*; he performed on tracks in the meantime on *Life in the Tropics* (2000) and *20th Anniversary*.

"The minute Jeff started playing with us again, I realized that he was so much a part of our sound back then," says Freeman. "That whole segment of his career is part of our collective vibe. He brings an organic reality to the mix, he's so melodic, and even more exciting is the fact that he's grown tremendously as a musician and makes adventurous musical choices that inspire all of us."

Another key element in making *Modern Art* truly worth a trip to the “Ripps Museum” is Freeman’s further development and rich creative partnership and recent marriage to the multi-talented songwriter Yaredt Leon, who co-wrote four songs on The Rippingtons’ 2005 Latin themed excursion *Wild Card*. On the new album, Freeman and Leon, who has scored Top 40 hits for Mexican artists like Jenny Rivera, co-wrote the exotically romantic “Pastels on Canvas” and the sensual, blues-punched ballad, “I Still Believe,” which is driven by Kashiwa’s simmering horn and Bill Heller’s brooding Hammond B-3. Leon has sole writing credit on the graceful, tropical flavored charmer “Sweet Lullaby.”

After launching *Modern Art* with the funky and swinging, brass-enhanced title track, Freeman—who does more lead acoustic guitar than on any previous Ripps project—breaks new stylistic ground, incorporating exotic world music elements on the sensuously romantic, acoustic guitar driven “Paris Groove” (featuring Heller’s lush accordion solo) and adding an Eastern authenticity to the hypnotic “Black Book” with an electric sitar. With the sizzling interaction between Freeman’s slow burning electric guitar and Kashiwa’s wild sax improvisations, the easy grooving “One Step Closer” and jamming, bluesy “Body Art” will remind longtime fans of the band’s glory days of the 90s—but with a souped up twist!

Even as they strut along with the classic Ripps sound, “Age of Reason” and “Jet Set” expand the group into edgier territory. The first is a fiery, hook filled anthem and the second floats an elegant jazzy melody over Rico Belled’s throbbing bass and Dave Karasony’s relentless blues/rock foundation on drums. *Modern Art* closes gently, with special guest artist Rick Braun adding his always seductive muted trumpet magic to the beautiful melody of “Love Story.”

Over the course of the past 23 years, one of the most fun-filled parts of the journey The Rippingtons have taken with their devoted fans has been Freeman’s unique way of opening them up to his extra-musical passions with each recording. *Curves Ahead* (1991) and *Black Diamond* were created around his intense love for skiing (he lived in Colorado for many years). *Topaz* (1999) reflected the guitarist’s appreciation for the beauty and mystique of the Southwest, while the Latin and island influenced vibes of *Life in the Tropics* kept listeners up to date on Freeman’s joyful relocation to South Florida—an experience explored even more deeply on *Wild Card*, which featured superstar Cuban vocalists Albita and Willy Chirino. South Florida also played a big factor on *Let It Ripp* (2003), which arrived at a time when Freeman was enjoying a Tiger Woods-like dedication to his favorite new recreational activity, golf. Perfectly paralleling these exciting activities as well and the music on every recording has been artist Bill Mayer’s famed (and very mobile, diverse and adaptable!) jazz cat, whose presence graces every Ripps album cover from *Moonlighting* on.

In recent years, Freeman has also been cultivating his skills behind the scenes as a talented landscape painter and illustrator, and an admirer and collector of *Modern Art*. “I come from a family of fine artists, and painting is something I had a knack for and developed when I was a kid,” Freeman says. “Even as I pursued other forms of artistic expression, I had a great interest and could always relate to it. I’m very proud of the paintings I have in my collection as well as my own that I’ve recently started to hang in the house. I’m hoping I can encourage some of our

fans to appreciate art as much as I do, and I soon plan to start posting some of my work on our website (www.rippingtons.com).”

Not every Rippingtons album was directly inspired by a major Freeman hobby, but collectively, they have formed the life soundtrack for hundreds of thousands of contemporary jazz fans worldwide for what is now going on a quarter century. Perhaps the most amazing part of The Rippingtons’ story is that after the unexpected success of *Moonlighting*, Russ Freeman—who had released a successful solo album, *Nocturnal Playground*, in 1985--was still on the fence regarding whether to pursue a career as a solo artist or become the full-time leader of a band. With the concept of a rotating collective approach under Freeman’s guidance and vision paving the way, The Ripps—whose first lineup included future contemporary jazz superstars Dave Koz, Kenny G and David Benoit--dominated the instrumental and urban jazz landscape from the late 80s on with their often exotically titled hit recordings, including *Kilimanjaro*, *Tourist in Paradise*, *Welcome to the St. James Club*, *Weekend In Monaco*, *Live in L.A.*, *Sahara*, *Brave New World* and *Live Across America*.

Over the years, Freeman has peppered the band’s discography with two solo albums (1995’s *Holiday* and 2002’s *Drive*) and dual recordings with Benoit, *The Benoit/Freeman Project* (1994) and *Benoit/Freeman 2* (2004). In 1994, Freeman and longtime manager Andi Howard launched the independent label Peak Records, now a division of the Concord Music Group.

“I think the music of The Rippingtons has struck a universal chord that is hard to fully explain,” states Freeman. “That connection has given us many loyal fans over the years and has been wonderful for me and the musicians I’ve worked with along the way. I value being part of everyone’s collective musical experiences more than I ever did—and am very excited about continuing to share my passions with those who share theirs.”

As The Rippingtons move beyond their 20th Anniversary and into a—to draw from one of their classic album titles—*Brave New World*, it’s a good time to stop for a moment, contemplate the past as we look forward to the future, and admire their latest work of *Modern Art*.

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