

High Street Records
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Roy Nathanson, Curtis Fowlkes & THE JAZZ PASSENGERS

Drawing on the great tradition of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Sun Ra's Arkestra, Louis Armstrong's Hot Five, Fats Waller and the Marx Brothers, The Jazz Passengers have forged a potent combination of music and comedy that has taken them from Knitting Factory cult status to festival stages all over the world. Says co-leader and principal composer Roy Nathanson, "My agenda was really always to connect a certain kind of downtown surrealist theatre - the kind of character-oriented stuff that Charles Ludlam used to do in his Theatre of the Ridiculous - with jazz or modern music or whatever you call our music."

Since their inception in 1987, The Jazz Passengers have scored several triumphs in this direction but none so poignant and profound as Jazz passengers In Love, their sixth project together as a working band and their debut for High Street Records. Produced by Hal Willner, this collection of songs about love, loss and longing features an all-star case of legendary vocalists including Jimmy Scott, Bob Dorough, Mavis Staples and Debbie Harry along with new sensations like Jeff Buckley, John Kelly, Bernard, D.K. Dyson, Jenni Muldaur and Freedy Johnston.

Says Nathanson of The Jazz Passengers' first all-vocal effort, "I feel like it's all these different characters in this one room. You enter the room and there's Jimmy Scott singing this sad, melancholy song, "Imitation Of A Kiss." Then you run into Debbie Harry who sounds so wonderful on "Dog In Sand," like a little kid and a knowing woman at the same time. You meet all these other amazing characters along the way telling their sad stories, then you exit on the lighter side with Freedy Johnston singing in a kind of upbeat vein on "Your Ambivalence." These are all really eccentric people and they really inhabit the chairs in that room.

Much of the material for Jazz Passengers In Love evolved out of Nathanson's ongoing partnership with monologist David Cale and playwright Ray Dobbins. Roy and David first collaborated in 1987 on "Smooch Music," a series of Cale monologues based by Nathanson's original music and performed at The Kitchen in New York. Their next project together was "The Nature Of Things," with music co-written by Marc Ribot, a charter member of The Jazz passengers. But their biggest success came in 1991 with "Deep In A Dream Of You," which premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and was later mounted at the Public Theatre in New York. As Nathanson explains, "It was a really satisfying production. It was sort of the culmination of that monologuing-with-music thing we had been doing, and it really got me thinking about incorporating more of this performance stuff into the Passengers while still retaining the band's signature sound that we had developed after several years together."

Nathanson and Cale share a majority of the lyric writing credits on Jazz Passengers In Love with Ray Dobbins, who has written for the avant-garde drag theatre troupe Bloodlips and who also write the book for Nathanson's 1990 'goofball opera,' "The jazz Passengers In Egypt," which had a brief run at La Mama Theatre in New York. Arto Lindsay, Bob Dorough, Nina Mankin and Jazz Passengers' drummer E.J. Rodriguez also contribute lyrics to this intriguingly eccentric song cycle.

"There's an androgynous quality to almost everybody on the album," says Nathanson. "And I like that. The genders are not clear so the whole thing feels like their character comes through without any specificity. Each one of these singers is about character and acting in the same way that Billie Holiday was a great actress. She acted a song to the point where you really believed that she was these characters she was singing about. And Jimmy Scott has that quality, Bob Dorough's got it, Mavis Staples definitely has it. And John Kelly is just amazing in that regard."

Kelly is a complete anomaly in popular music. His swooning falsetto voice lends a haunting beauty to Nathanson's dark love song "Swim To Me," with lyrics by David Cale. That same androgynous quality plays against the turbulence of "The Handsome Man From Fiji," composed by Nathanson with lyrics by Cale. Elsewhere, Mavis Staples, of the famed Staples Singers, wraps her glorious pipes around "Kidnapped," a tricky Nathanson number with a 7/4 bridge that proved to be a challenge for the gospel-soul diva. Quintessential jazz singer Bob Dorough, who has worked with the late, great Miles Davis, swings his way through "Ring The Bell," composed by Passenger vibist Bill Ware with lyrics by Dorough himself. Jenni Muldaur (Maria's daughter) lends her ebullient voice to "American Mr.s You," composed by Passenger bassist Brad Jones with lyrics by Nina Mankin. And Jeff Buckley (Tim's son) unveils his angelic voice on "Jolly Street," written by Passenger trombonist and co-leader Curtis Fowlkes with lyrics by Ray Dobbins and Roy Nathanson.

"I think that, finally, all the great performance, even in music, is really a subset of theatre," says Nathanson. "I don't mean to minimize the pure musical aspect but it's still narrative, it's still storytelling in some kind of way. And all the singers on this project are also great storytellers in their own way. So Jazz Passengers In Love is kind of like a bunch of short stories, I guess."

Brooklyn-born co-leaders Nathanson and Fowlkes met while playing with the Big Apple Circus in New York. They both later joined The Lounge Lizards along with guitarist Marc Ribot and drummer E.J. Rodriguez. During their tenure in the Lizards, Nathanson approached Fowlkes about doing a separate duet recording on the side. More instruments were added to that session until the duet had grown to a septet featuring violinist Jim Nolet, guitarist Ribot, drummer Rodriguez, bassist Brad Jones and vibist Bill Ware. "We didn't actually have an idea to put a band together," says Fowlkes, "but it was at a time when that particular formation of the Lizards was coming to a head, so it was kind of a natural progression to form The Jazz Passengers."

The first album, Broken Night/Red Light, was released in 1987 on the small Belgium label Crepuscule Records. They followed that up the next year with Deranged and Decomposed on Crepuscule. The Passengers' third album, Implement Yourself on New World Records, was produced in 1990 through a grant from the Lila Wallace/Readers Digest Fund and received more rave reviews. They have also released two CDs on the Knitting Factory Works label, 1991's Live at the Knitting Factory and 1993's Plain Old Joe.

While they had included a couple of vocal numbers on previous albums, Jazz Passengers In Love represent their first full-blown effort in this vocal direction. And as Nathanson pointed out, "Hal (Willner) sort of cast this project like a movie and I really feel it works like crazy. To have all these great character singers on one album is a dream come true for me. And what's also satisfying is that underneath it all you can still tell they're Passengers tunes. That's one of the advantages to having a band stay together for seven years. The music is always influenced by the aesthetic that we have together."

It's a wacky, swinging, hard-driving, dissonant/romantic aesthetic. The glorious voices on Jazz Passengers In Love are just the icing on the cake.