

KIRK
W H A L U M
THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING
TO JAZZ
CHAPTER IV

After a six-year wait, the much anticipated *The Gospel According to Jazz, Chapter IV* is finally here with a two-disc, 19-song CD (and a feature-length DVD) that sets a benchmark for live recording, nuanced performance and deep improvisation at the most profoundly felt, thoughtfully conceived and personal level. This award-winning series that was launched with the initial *The Gospel According to Jazz, Chapter I* in 1998 has transformed the concept of sharing the “gospel truth” through instrumental music. Each of the subsequent releases has ascended the Jazz and Gospel charts garnering critical acclaim and award nominations, with “It’s What I Do” from *GATJ III* taking home the Grammy for Best Gospel Song in 2011.

Recorded live at the Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn, New York, *The Gospel According to Jazz, Chapter IV* serves up more of a ‘good’ thing, but definitely not more of the same. From the plaintive and tender strains of “Just As I Am,” there is a unique and welcoming beauty that invites and compels not only listening, but also participation. This classic song sung at so many altar calls and the end of countless crusades is switched-up to instead open the evening; the haunting beauty of the hymn nails the redemptive theme and radical embrace and hospitality of the Father from the outset. It also cues the listener to expect the unexpected, such as unlikely songs repurposed to musically illustrate the gospel message in both oblique and direct ways. Plus Kirk Whalum’s insightful and revelational narrative both in concert and post-production in the DVD version enriches the whole experience, with an up-close and personal look at the heart of the artist and his art.

This time around, Whalum once again shares the stage with members of his exceptionally-gifted family, including brother Kevin (vocals) and nephews Kenneth III (saxophones) and Kortland (vocals). Adding sheen and sonic depth, his cohorts in jazz supergroup BWB (both solo artists in their own right), Rick Braun (trumpet, flugelhorn, valve trombone) and Norman Brown (guitars, vocals) join an eminent ensemble

comprising legendary percussionist “Doc” Gibbs, renowned bassist Gerald Veasey, drummer Marcus “Stix” Finnie, rising vocal star (and Stevie Wonder protégé) Sheléa, as well as returning co-producer John Stoddart who lends his eloquent and soulful keys and vocals to the mix.

GATJ IV is an invitation to pause, hear, and “see” in a fresh, prescient way, but above all, it is a tribute album in a uniquely gospel-centric way. Honored here are heads of state (Mandela and Obama), departed and greatly respected and loved artists (George Duke, Wayman Tisdale, and John Coltrane), alongside mothers (Kirk’s... the Virgin Mary, and yours if you like) and a homeless woman Whalum came to call friend (“Nannette”). Beyond that, the Father who made them and Christ who saved them are honored as well. In myriad ways, the gospel’s welcome is declared and displayed with eloquence and power.

Part of that essential gospel hospitality is the way *GATJ* has always spotlighted the God-given gifts of leading artists outside the “church” world. Says, Kirk, “We always try to reach out to the cadre beyond gospel artists, to a Norman Brown, a Rick Braun, or Doc Gibbs; that is a very crucial part of this. By their willingness to be part of it and by honoring them and their spiritual quest, what we are able to do is create a safe space. They might think: *I may be suspicious about organized religion, but someone is welcoming me on behalf of Christ...* and that takes us back to God’s radical welcome. *The Gospel According to Jazz* embraces the talent God dishes out. It’s never so gospel that it loses its outreach. The traditional marketing wisdom, of course would be that with *The Gospel According to Jazz* you should have some gospel artists.”

But Whalum’s music and perspective is informed by the unconventional and expansive. Says Whalum, “One of the things on my mind was carving a deeper niche in the improvisation: longer, more in-depth solos, a little bit more avant garde.” The emphasis that amplifies the direction taken on *Chapter III* is indisputable on songs like “Madiba,” Kirk’s elegant, polyrhythmic South African seasoned tribute to Nelson Mandela, and on “Triage,” an instrumental editorial-on-and-embodiment-of the mash-up of life and death in the world—melodic, dissonant, chaotic and composed, it’s an improvisational tour de force. Undoubtedly his signature melodic and soulful fusion drawing from jazz idiom across generations and genres—contemporary jazz to Dixieland, Bebop, Big Band and beyond—as well as a strong identification with r&b, blues, world music, rock, Latin and pop hasn’t changed, but the balance has indisputably shifted. And the cast of all-stars including first and foremost Whalum, bumps the plan from conception to reality throughout.

“One of the frustrations for my band is that we’re playing these big festival gigs that focus on instrumental pop/r&b, which I enjoy—don’t get me wrong—but that’s 60 percent of what I do. There’s an unspoken expectation to stick to the more pop repertoire and keep it moving! There’s not time for pensive, meditative, contemplative, take your time with what you’re really feeling exploration. On this record, I was intent on doing that. To do so takes courage. You know not everyone is going to be with you. But if you can get them to slow down, to listen, I think they’ll go there.” Along with the previously mentioned “Madiba” and “Triage,” Kirk’s tribute to Coltrane, “Un Amor Supremo”—an original with a Cubano/Santana/Afro-Caribbean vibe and Doc Gibbs strongly featured—reflects that trend. Trane’s passionate artistry is alluded to not only in the title but the circling extended solos and Whalum’s abandoned yet precision performance—*Transcendent. Street. Smart.*

In the mix of remembrance and tribute, sorrow and reflection, improvisation and exploration, there is plenty of celebration, faith, delight and humor, so going deeper doesn’t mean darker. “Cain’t Stay Blue” is an infectious mood elevator, with a vocal and musical hook that won’t let go. The persistent hope, patience and resolve not to give up that captured the essence of the Civil Rights Movement and a nation in 1964 on Curtis Mayfield’s “Keep On Pushing” is a *GATJ IV* highlight. And on “This is the Day,” which has no connection to the song with the same title you sang in Sunday school, there is a pastoral lightness and delicate whimsy that is breathed by Kirk on flute. A first for both Whalum and the series, although he has played background flute with BWB, this is his solo debut.

And that is not only the first. On the downside, it is the first *GATJ* without the inimitable keys of jazz giant George Duke. Kirk Whalum composed and takes the vocal lead on an evocative tribute and heartfelt requiem to his dear friend and fellow artist titled “There,” derived from Duke’s favorite saying “We Were There.” Abounding with sweet and hopeful transparency, and contemporary jazz opulence, underscored by Stoddart’s keys, it’s a fitting tribute to the Duke who is now ‘there’ with his King. The late Wayman Tisdale’s song “Sunday’s Best” is both a tribute and a contemporary jazz triumph showcasing the prodigious talents of BWB and bassist Gerald Veasley.

And on the vocal side of things, Kirk’s brother Kevin’s laidback understated cool retools Paul and Linda McCartney’s “Let ‘Em In” (complete with an intricate scat) to a wry rephrase of Revelation 3:20 (“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he

with me”). The implication being those in the Church might want to open the doors of their heart to Jesus... but also to a world in need of a warmer welcome. Whalum suggests, “Lets do a better job of letting people in without judgment, as Kevin’s adapted second verse so aptly describes.”

Sheléa brings her timeless and irresistible clarity, warmth, subtlety and soul to the Foo Fighters mega-hit “My Hero,” the slave era Negro spiritual, “Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child,” and “I See You.” Each song shows another facet of this dimensional artist. The latter was written by Kirk in response to and reflecting the customary greeting, “I see you” of the Na’vi tribe in the movie *Avatar*—another unexpected context for and allusion to gospel truth, so a perfect fit for a *GATJ* chapter.

The Father always “sees” us. Jesus always saw, honored, acknowledged people, whether a prostitute pouring perfumed oil on his feet, a woman at a well with a lot of relational baggage or a tax collector up a tree. And at the heart of *The Gospel According to Jazz, Chapter IV* is an invitation to hear and see...to see God and to see people, to be welcomed into the Father’s house and throw the doors of your heart open to Him and with radical hospitality, welcome those he loves and created.