



## Joey DeFrancesco *In The Key Of The Universe*

As he's made abundantly clear over the past 30 years, **Joey DeFrancesco** has plenty of soul. What most listeners probably haven't spent much time pondering is that soul's place in the universe. On his adventurous new album, ***In The Key Of The Universe***, the master organist turns his musical attentions to his spiritual side, tapping into a strain of metaphysical jazz that's fueled sonic searchers for more than half a century. Joey D calls upon disciples and missionaries of jazz to join him in paving the way to enlightenment.

***In The Key Of The Universe***, due out **March 1** via **Mack Avenue Records**, arrives almost exactly 50 years after the release of *Karma*, the landmark album by legendary saxophonist **Pharoah Sanders**. One of the primary exponents of spiritually-oriented jazz, Sanders makes three guest appearances on the album, including an update of his best-known track from *Karma*, the cosmically influential "The Creator Has A Master Plan." Playing drums on that track was the great **Billy Hart**, who reunites with Sanders as well as DeFrancesco, with whom he's worked several times over the years since joining the organist for his 1989 album *Where WERE You?*

Hart makes up part of the core band for ***In The Key Of The Universe*** along with percussion virtuoso **Sammy Figueroa**, another *Where WERE You?* alum who has played with almost literally everyone over the years, from Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins to David Bowie and Patti Smith to Mariah Carey and Diana Ross. The multi-talented saxophonist **Troy Roberts**, a frequent collaborator in recent years, shows off his skills on tenor, soprano, alto, and even the acoustic bass. At the center of it all is the always scintillating organ work of DeFrancesco, who retains his trademark robust swing and gritty funk while striking out in freer, more exploratory directions.

An artist who's always been deeply attuned to the full history of jazz and able to tap into it in innovative ways, DeFrancesco naturally feels a profound connection to the questing, devotional jazz of forebears from Sanders to John Coltrane to John McLaughlin. It may seem like a change in direction, but unexpected travels into new territory has been a central tenet of DeFrancesco's music throughout his remarkable career.

"I pride myself on being a musical chameleon," the organist explains. "There's so much good music that it's hard to stay in one place, at least for me. I love being able to go in any direction, and lately that's sent my music in a more free jazz direction – but still with a groove."

That adaptability is something that DeFrancesco also recognized in Pharoah Sanders, whose own work has long delved into myriad stylistic approaches. But for ***In The Key Of The Universe***, DeFrancesco wanted the sax giant to tap into that spiritual vein that so memorably flows through his distinctive sound. "Pharoah is one of the go-to guys when it comes to that spiritual aspect of the music," he says. "A lot of people do that kind of thing, but I like to go directly to the source, and he really is the source."

In many ways an entire subgenre of consciousness-expanding jazz can be traced back to *Karma* and more specifically "The Creator Has A Master Plan," the 32-minute epic that takes up almost the entire album. DeFrancesco's rendition whittles the piece down to a relatively succinct 11 minutes, though without losing any of the original's transcendent power, which DeFrancesco felt like a jolt in the studio.

“As soon as Pharoah picked up his horn and started playing that melody, my hair just stood straight up,” he recalls. “Then Billy started doing his thing with the mallets, wide open and free. Once it gets going it’s so hard to stop; you could listen to that vibe forever. It was almost an unexplainable feeling – absolutely a downright spiritual experience.”

Sanders also lends his singular tenor sound to the enthralling title track, on which he plays in tandem with Roberts, and to the more tender “And So It Is,” where he’s paired with DeFrancesco’s trumpet playing in addition to his cascading organ sound. All three tracks showcase Sanders’ unparalleled ability to be simultaneously raw and refined, mesmerizing and ferocious.

The rustling of Figueroa’s percussion paired with Roberts’ keening soprano usher in the album with DeFrancesco’s “Inner Being,” whose introspective opening gives way to a blissful groove. An Indian-inspired drone underlies “Vibrations In Blue,” where Hart’s hypnotic rhythms usher in the exotic, interlaced voices of Roberts and DeFrancesco. The buoyant “Awake And Blissed” follows, a rollicking mission statement highlighted by the leader’s fleet, jubilant keyboard runs. “It Swung Wide Open” picks up the pace even more for a blistering jaunt that shines the spotlight on Hart’s taut, stop-on-a-dime rhythmic control.

The band pares back to a trio for the lush “Soul Perspective,” which gives ample space to Roberts’ stirring, passionate tenor. That sound turns breathy and intensely moving on the absorbing ballad “A Path Through The Noise,” which derives its meditative atmosphere from the combination of DeFrancesco’s shimmering organ vibe and trumpet solo, Hart’s exquisite brushwork, and Figueroa’s crystalline accents. The album concludes with the touching, heartfelt bossa-tinged reflection “Easier To Be.”

“The direction in which my life is going always affects what I’m doing musically,” DeFrancesco says. “As I grow older, I find myself attracted to a more spiritual vibe. It’s always been that way, to some extent – especially playing music and going into the zone, which has to do with being in touch with the universe. It’s not about religion, it’s just a spiritual vibe that respects everything, in music and in life.”

**Joey DeFrancesco · *In The Key Of The Universe***  
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