



KIRK WHALUM *ROMANCE LANGUAGE*

Kirk Whalum is in love. He's in love with music. He's in love with God. He's in love with passing on his knowledge by educating and training our youth. He's in love with languages. And he's in love with his wife of over 30 years.

Many decry a lack of role models for our youth to emulate, especially when it comes to men of color. They obviously haven't met the humble Grammy® winning saxophonist. Many have been labeled as renaissance men, but Whalum is a bona fide renaissance man who gives his life and love to serving others through music, education, and by preaching The Word. This musician's musician literally walks the talk. Spend a little time with the man who relishes life with romance and you will depart inspired, and yes, in love. Such is the intoxicating power of his passions.

Romance Language is Whalum's 19th solo record—his 29th album if you count collaborations and compilations. His artistic muse has accomplished the rare feat of achieving commercial success and critical acclaim in contemporary and straight-ahead jazz, as well as in secular and non-secular music. There is a French connection to the album title. "French is the language of romance," says the trilingual Whalum, who is fluent in English, French and Spanish.

The essence of *Romance Language* is Whalum's modern day recreation of a collection of duets recorded in 1963 by iconic jazz saxophonist **John Coltrane** and the then underappreciated vocalist **Johnny Hartman**. The pair recorded six standards composed by the likes of Irving Berlin, Sammy Cahn, Billy Strayhorn, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. A number of critics have called the original recording a classic, thus Whalum treated the material with reverence and respect. To bring the album to fruition, he followed Coltrane's tact of selecting a singer whom he believed to be immensely gifted yet deserving of a far larger spotlight: his younger brother **Kevin**. "The timbre of Kevin's voice is similar to Hartman's," Whalum states. "Not that I would ever liken myself to the genius of Coltrane but prior to his recording with Hartman, Coltrane was revered as a technical master yet he aspired to play more like Johnny Hodges, who was known for playing pretty."

Whalum produced and arranged *Romance Language* with **John Stoddart**. Favoring a live sound with virtually no overdubs, the tracks were laid by Whalum's touring band comprised of Stoddart (piano, keyboards, organ), Marcus Finnie (drums), Braylon Lacy (bass) and Kevin Turner (electric guitar) along with robust accompaniment courtesy of Michael "Nomad" Ripoll (acoustic guitar), Ralph Lofton (organ), George Tidwell (flugelhorn, trumpet), and percussionists Bashiri Johnson and Javier Solis.

Since the Coltrane/Hartman recording was barely over 30 minutes long, Whalum selected four newer R&B-pop songs to cover to complete the collection, candlelight ballads that seamlessly fit the album's motif. "Juxtaposing timeless standards with new 'standards' is a risk, but the songs I selected touched and impacted me. I love them, which is why I elected to record them," he explains.

The first six songs on *Romance Language* appear in the exact order as they appear on the Coltrane/Hartman collection; thus Berlin's "They Say It's Wonderful" opens the record, a mood-setter on which Kirk's sax soloing embraces and accentuates the notes emoted by Kevin's velvety voice. "It's the song that hits you first. It sets the table and says 'something special is about to happen.' What you hear first is the sound of a needle being dropped onto a vinyl album. The opening notes were played on an upright piano that then melds into a Fender Rhodes. It was our way of giving respect sonically to the original record as we bring it into the present day with our offering," Whalum shares.

Playing both tenor sax and flute on Cahn's pledge of enduring love, "Dedicated To You," Whalum's commanding presence is heartfelt and intimate while avoiding overwrought emotion. "We boldly took initiative to implant the heart and soul of these original songs into another outfit. It was important to us that we paid tribute without duplicating," says Whalum. "Every one of these songs is about horizontal love, and vertically...the whole thing. Love on a horizontal plane is between two broken people. We're all broken—dysfunctional in one way or another."

"My One and Only Love" is a sweet serenade exquisitely rendered with the added ambience of acoustic guitar flourishes sprinkled like a dusting of glitter. Whalum approached the song both secularly and non-secularly. He was 15 when he met his wife, Ruby, at Baptist camp. "To me, this song is about the concept of having one love. On a spiritual level, that one love is God."

Kevin takes center stage on "Lush Life" and delivers an arresting showstopper. Kirk says, "The song was written by a lonely gay man [Strayhorn]. He was a genius who was misunderstood and mistreated. The lyrics are genius. Actually, it's a gospel song and I'm really feeling him [Strayhorn]. The song is utterly and completely honest yet there is so little honesty in gospel songs."

The musicians stretch out on "You Are Too Beautiful," taking their time—8:32 to be exact—to allow the gorgeous melody to gently permeate a seductive mid-tempo R&B groove. Throughout the entire album, Kevin's debonair vocal tone and sophisticated phrasing adds elegance and class.

Concluding the Coltrane/Hartman portion of **Romance Language**, flamenco-like acoustic guitar riffing and Whalum's sultry soprano sax color "Autumn Serenade" with *amour*. "We took the most liberties with this track, giving it an Arabic, Latin feel with a hint of darkness to the scale," states Whalum.

On "Almost Doesn't Count," it is Kirk and Kevin's 83-year-old uncle, **Hugh "Peanuts" Whalum**, who steals the spotlight with his warm, sandpapery lead vocals. "In the studio, Peanuts struggled to understand the song. He kept saying it didn't make sense. It was originally recorded by **Brandy**, hence there is a bit of an interesting contrast of having Peanuts sing a newer song that was first sung by a teenager," says Kirk. The elder Whalum delivered a stirring and captivating performance by pouring all his years of experience into song.

The first of three instrumentals, "I Wish I Wasn't," was penned by hit-makers **Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis**. In Whalum's astute hands, his lyrical sax gracefully romances with eloquence in place of lyrics about a pained heart. He offers, "Again, the lyric is so honest. Honest lament. Pain is part of life. It's honest. In the song, we need to hang with the woman in the lyrics, be there with her in the moment and feel her pain. It makes the song empowering."

After a flute intro pays homage to **Minnie Riperton's** classic "Loving You," "I Wanna Know" assumes a breezy, reggae-light cadence. "The intro sets the stage for romance," says Whalum. "I love the simplicity of the melody of the **Joe** tune. It's innocent...kind of sing-song-y. The role of an artist recording covers is to be an interpreter of melodies."

Closing with a version of **Eric Benet's** "Spend My Life With You," the first radio single from the album, Whalum loosens his grip on the reins to unleash the fire and intensity of his unadulterated passion. "It was an honor to co-produce and co-arrange this album in New York City and Memphis with John [Stoddart], my musical director. He is like my musical soul mate. His strengths are my weaknesses and vice versa. We took the liberty of going all the way gospel on this song. I took the song to be about spending eternity together with Jesus." Whalum tapped the organ player from his father's church to play on this track.

Whalum grew up in Memphis, the son of a pastor; thus he was enmeshed in regular sermons. He attended Texas Southern University in Houston where he was encouraged by a professor to apply for a scholarship to study abroad in Paris. He earned that scholarship and says the experience changed his life.

As a young musician, Whalum was mentored by seminal saxophone player **Arnett Cobb**, whose silver ring presently adorns Whalum's finger, a gift from Cobb's daughter upon his passing. "As an artist, you want to leave a legacy. Cobb certainly left one to be proud of and that is my goal as well. How you are perceived in the [music] industry changes over time. It goes up and it goes down. You really can't control that and it is not smart to let it impact your psyche. What saves me is quite simple: practicing my instrument. There are so many variables and intangibles that you cannot control yet practicing is practice. It is proactive. You can say, 'I improved today.' Your emotional health is a direct reflection of how you perceive what you can control and what you cannot control."

After Paris, Whalum and Ruby settled in Houston, married and had four kids: two boys and two girls who are now young adults. His soulfully expressive tenor sax voice is unique and has appeared on literally hundreds of recordings by Whitney Houston, Barbara Streisand, Quincy Jones, Luther Vandross, George Benson, Al Jarreau, Michael McDonald, Stanley Clarke, George Duke and Larry Carlton—as well as on collaborative albums with Bob James, Rick Braun and Norman Brown.

Whalum released his solo debut, *Floppy Disk*, in 1985. To date, he topped the Billboard contemporary jazz album charts twice (*And You Know That!* and *Cache*) and has amassed 11 Grammy nominations. Whalum finally took home a coveted Grammy last year for a duet with **Lalah Hathaway** that appeared on his *The Gospel According to Jazz: Chapter III*.

Formative stints playing with James and Carlton enabled him to travel extensively, including to such far-reaching locales as Bangkok and Osaka. "Those guys are artists on the fringe. They're jazz and pop. They're straight-ahead and contemporary jazz. They blurred the genre lines and that impacted my own music," recalls Whalum, whose rich catalogue spans collections of various shades of jazz, R&B and gospel.

While auditioning a bass player for his band, Whalum found himself in an unusual situation. "I was auditioning **Rickey Minor** to play with me, but it turned out that he had just become Whitney's [Houston] MD [musical director] and he was actually auditioning me." Whalum booked the gig that he held for seven years. "It was my first tour ever with a pop singer and it was the first time that I ever got a consistent paycheck...a generous paycheck," Whalum recalls with a chuckle. That period included recording the most listened to sax solo in history when he played on the international smash hit "I Will Always Love You" from *The Bodyguard* soundtrack.

His affection for Paris endured, hence after spending a decade in Houston followed by a decade in Pasadena, the Whalums moved back to the city of lights. "The kids were growing up and after flirting with the idea for so many years, Ruby and I figured the time was now or never. We sold everything we had and moved to Paris. I really wanted to fully immerse myself in the language and culture, and that's the only way to do it," he shares. They lived there for a year-and-a-half.

Returning to the States, they lived in Nashville for a short time before moving back home in Memphis. He attended seminary from 2007-2010 and earned a Master's degree in the Art of Religion last year. "My father was a preacher, thus being involved as a minister is part of my core identity. The challenge is to find a way to [minister] with my music and from the stage," reflects Whalum.

Having been mentored during his formative years, it is important to Whalum that he give back what was given to him. He says, "The role of a mentor is to lend an environment that is safe to nourish inspiration."

A few years ago, Whalum found an extraordinary way to serve as a mentor and an educator: he took on the duties as president/CEO of the STAX Music Academy and the STAX Museum of American Soul Music. "STAX is comprised of three entities: the museum spans the history of soul music, blues and gospel. There's the music academy, which has 65 high school-aged kids who audition to get in. And then there is the Soulsville Charter School that has about 450 underprivileged kids grades 6-12. STAX's mission is to nurture the next generation of soul communicators," he explains.

Whalum anticipates spending this year on two concert tours. He will team with Kevin on dates to support ***Romance Language***, and will share the bill with **Jonathan Butler** and **CeCe Winans** on The Apostles of Gospel tour this spring. Looking ahead to 2013, Whalum wants to add to his already well-rounded body of work by writing two books: a sax instruction book and a tome that explores the relationship between theology and music and the arts.

“We are evolving all the time. As I gain understanding, I’m becoming aware of time...that it is running out. I’m 53-years-old yet I feel like I’m just getting it now,” he reveals with a smile.

Grammy-winning recording artist. Mentor and educator. Devout minister. A romantic passionate about his wife and family. No one knows how much time any of us have left, but it is certain that Whalum will spend his using music, mentorship, ministry and language to communicate honestly in service to others. In everything that he does, he strives to uplift, enlighten, inspire and empower. Kirk Whalum is on a mission. And that mission is love.

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