

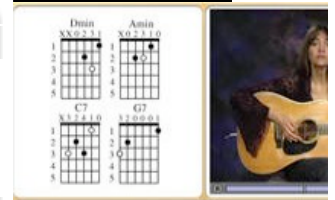
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Once a radio announcer who was obviously a classical music fan confronted me on the air and stated that blues is a lowly form of music whose text is relegated to the gutter with stories of loose women and booze and etc. ... and sometimes you can't even understand the words. Then he asked the question; "What do you think about that Mr. Siegel?" I answered immediately; "Opera! I rest my case." - Corky Siegel

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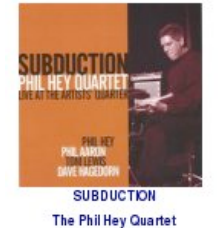
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Four for the Holidays

Contributed by Joe Montague
Monday, 10 December 2007



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One Wish

One Wish, Johanna Sillanpaa (Chronograph Records)

Early in December, Johanna Sillanpaa, who is quickly establishing herself as a top R&B singer in Canada, released her first Christmas album, *One Wish*. The advance publicity for the CD billed it as being unique among holiday recordings, particularly because of its diversity, and this writer would concur. While there are a lot of very good and timeless Christmas recordings, *One Wish* has the potential to reach a much wider audience than most, because it covers traditional carols such as "O Come All Ye Faithful," original compositions like the funky "Cinnamon & Sugarcones," and nods to her Swedish heritage with songs such as "Bright Shining Star," which Sillanpaa translated into English from the original "Jul, Jul Stralande Jul."

Sillanpaa, who has been singing professionally since her early teens, is as proficient at covering songs as performing her original compositions; however, as one would expect, her strongest connection is with the tunes that she has penned. By far the best three songs on this album were written or co-written by the singer. Her superb R&B vocals shine on "Grateful," a song that she co-wrote with co-producer Chris Andrew. Tatiana Lund's background vocals for "Grateful" are incredibly beautiful, and complement Sillanpaa nicely.

For the fanciful, original composition "Cinnamon & Sugarcones," co-written with her old friend Aaron Young, Sillanpaa is joined, as she is throughout the CD, by longtime friends, including the virtuoso acoustic guitarist Young and bassist Kodi Hutchinson, whose work on this record is only surpassed by seeing him perform live. Also on hand are drummer Tyler Hornby and elegant pianist / keyboardist Chris Andrew.

It is, however, the title track, the soulful "One Wish," that will blow your mind, pull at your heartstrings, and have you firing up your computer to see how you can purchase this CD. About eighteen months ago, when I first heard one of Sillanpaa's songs on the Calgary radio station California 103, I recall being struck by how emotive her vocals were. Aaron Young's guitar bridge is as beautiful as the singer's voice, and as elegant as Andrew's keys. "One Wish" is a song that will be with us for many years, and our children will probably be listening to it for many Christmases to come.

The last four tracks of this thirteen-song CD are sung in Swedish, but just before she gets there, Sillanpaa delivers a beautiful interpretation of Joni Mitchell's "River." For those unfamiliar with the Mitchell tune, this is a peaceful, contemplative song.

Since I do not speak Swedish, the insights that I can provide to the remaining four tracks are restricted to the instrumental portions of the songs. The gentle "När Det Lider Mot Jul" has a pretty piano solo. "Ett Barn Är Fött På Denna Dag" is the second song featured on *One Wish* that has music originally penned by Martin Luther, the other being "A Child Is Born Upon This Day." Lyrics for "Ett Barn Är Fött På Denna Dag," were written by Olaus Martini and Johan Olaf Wallin. If like me you do not understand the Swedish language, don't worry, there are enough great instrumentals provided by Andrew, Young, Hornby and Hutchinson to keep you listening. The remaining songs include "Jul, Jul Stralande Jul," recorded in English on an earlier track, and "Dagen Är Kommen."



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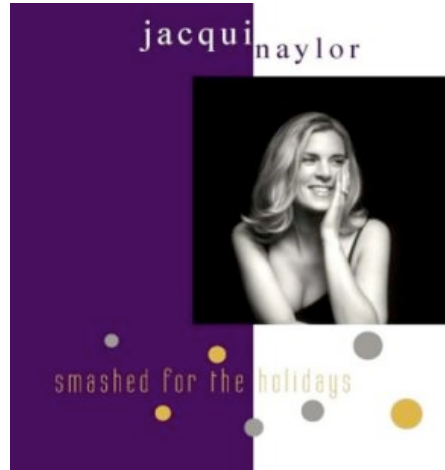


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The larger American markets may not yet be familiar with the name Johanna Sillanpaa, but it is only a matter of time, because she can more than hold her own with any of the great R&B / soul singers whose music is now in high rotation.

For more information, visit <http://www.johannamusic.com/video/index.htm>

Smashed for the Holidays, Jacqui Naylor (Ruby Records)



Smashed for the Holidays

For those not familiar with the term “smashed” when used in a musical sense or the similar description, “mashed.” Jacqui Naylor’s *Smashed for the Holidays* is not an encouragement to get inebriated, but refers to the process of combining two songs from very different genres to create a new composition. If you love music that is experimental, cutting edge, but performed by a vocalist and a backing band, both of whom possess an abundance of talent, then you will want to tuck this splendid album into your digital or retail shopping cart.

The southern rock rhythms of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama” greet us as the disc starts to spin, but wait, this is not how we remember “Santa Claus Is Coming To Town.” Fasten your seat belts, folks, because the lady with the deep alto vocals is backed by some terrific guitar riffs, courtesy of Michael Romanowski’s bass and steel string guitar, as well as Art Khu’s electric six strings.

Led Zeppelin fans are going to be blown away by what Naylor has done with the British band’s 1973 hit tune, “D’yer Mak’er,” as she smashes the rhythm and beat with the melody and lyrics for “Santa Baby.” Cooing sensually, Naylor delivers an outstanding performance.

Jacqui Naylor is not a novelty act, nor is she to be confused with the entertaining parodies of “Weird Al” Yankovic. Since the early nineties, fans with eclectic musical tastes have been enjoying the jazz-trained and gifted vocals of Naylor. Her vocal chops come to the forefront on “Celebrate Early And Often,” which she co-wrote with Art Khu. The song is followed up by a strong cover of John Lennon’s “Happy X-mas (War Is Over).”

Naylor serves up a trio of very pretty vocal performances in the middle of this CD, Mel Torme’s “The Christmas Song,” and two original songs, “Thank You Baby” and “Winter,” both of which were also Naylor/Khu collaborations. “Thank You Baby” highlights Khu’s excellent musicianship as he serves up some memorable riffs. After hearing the opening tracks of *Smashed for the Holidays*, you cannot help be impressed by the sensitivity with which Naylor sings these three songs. Very seldom do you find someone who is vocally gifted enough to span a number of genres, and who can also bring the insight and emotion necessary to impact the music. Jacqui Naylor has that ability.

I was impressed with how well Art Khu’s arrangements for the Police’s “Every Breath You Take” worked with the lyrics to the classic Christmas song, “Silver Bells.” If you had previously never heard either song, you would probably think this is how the music was intended to sound.

Other highlights include Naylor’s Edie Brickell-like singing of “Father Christmas,” the original track, “Christmas Ain’t What It Used To Be,” and “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” Jon Evans’s acoustic bass vibes and Khu’s gentle caressing of the piano keys provide the perfect accompaniment for another pretty performance by Naylor.

Trio West Plays Holiday Songs (Yummyhouse Records)

When I spun *Trio West Plays Holiday Songs* for the first time, what really appealed to me was the intimacy that was created on this album by Tobias T. Gebb (drummer, arranger, producer), Eldad Zvulun (piano), and bassists Neal Miner and Miles Brown (tracks 1, 10, 12). Zvulun’s piano sensibilities, particularly on the opening two tracks, “O Tannenbaum” and “Silent Night,” put you in a front row seat of a cozy lounge. Although this is a studio production, the artists have retained the warmth of a live performance, something that is rare in today’s world of technological wizardry.

Gebb’s gentle drumming, an oxymoron I am sure in some circles, contribute to the gentle interpretations of “O Tannenbaum,” and “Silent Night,” as he makes liberal use of his brushes, and wields a pair of soft drumsticks. Gebb created new arrangements for “Silent Night,” which lengthens the song, reminds us that this is still a jazz CD, but at the same time remains




Trio West Plays Holiday Songs

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respectful to the original composition.

In terms of song selection there are not a lot of surprises as the songs are all seasonal classics or carols, including "What Child Is This," "Winter Wonderland," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and "I'll Be Home For Christmas."

"Christmas Time Is Here," a song written by Vince Gauraldi and Lee Mendelson, but forever linked to Charles M. Schulz's character Charlie Brown, is contemplative. We remember the scraggly Christmas tree that Charlie Brown brought to the Christmas pageant and the reminder that all of us are deserving of unconditional love.

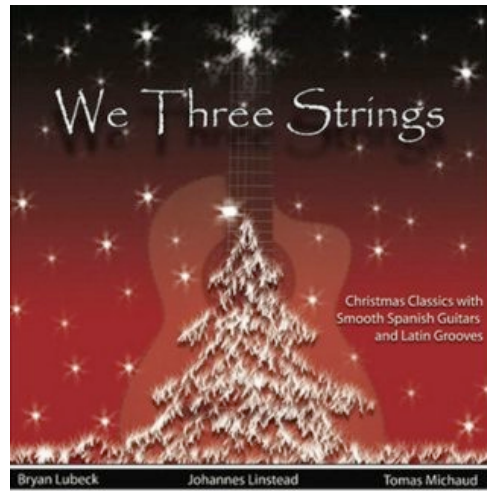
Trio West takes a very lyrical approach to their music and that is particularly noticeable with "Winter Wonderland" and the Mel Torme/Robert Wells's tune, "The Christmas Song." If you didn't know the words to these songs, I suspect that you would find yourself improvising lyrics to accompany the ensemble's emotive playing.

I really liked bassist Neal Miner's emotive playing on Frank Loesser's "What Are You Doing New Year's Eve," a song that is further enhanced by the romantic inflections of pianist Zvulun serving up proof that not all sentimental tunes need words to evoke a strong emotional response.

When it comes to Christmas songs, I tend to be a traditionalist, and know how I like my familiar tunes to sound, but Trio West's CD really got under my skin in a good way. For instance, I quite enjoyed "O Little Town of Bethlehem," which combines the traditional with new and livelier arrangements. I would not refer to this as a solemn or humble offering, but I do think it is celebratory, which is exactly what Christmas is supposed to be about.

If you are making a shopping list for Christmas music, the CD *Trio West Plays Holiday Songs* should be on it.

We Three Strings, Bryan Lubeck / Johannes Linstead / Tomas Michaud (EarthScape)



If you are looking to put a different spin on your Christmas music this year, you may want to give a listen to *We Three Strings*, featuring guitar maestros Bryan Lubeck, Johannes Linstead and Tomas Michaud. Linstead has long been considered one of the world's foremost guitar Latino artists, while Michaud considers himself to be a New World Flamenco guitarist, and Lubeck has drawn praise from those within both the smooth jazz community and the flamenco world. When the CD was first released in 2006, it was critically acclaimed by music industry professionals, and was in high rotation with numerous American radio stations. The album was created in a unique fashion, with each of the three artists penning new arrangements and performing their own music. What we have is mini booklets of songs from three different guitarists, but that retains a cohesive sound throughout the album.

Linstead, Lubeck and Michaud utilize Latin rhythms to provide us with pretty interpretations of Christmas classics such as "Little Drummer Boy," which I never really liked because I found it to be monotonous. Michaud, however, wrote new soaring arrangements for the song, injecting some life into the tune while still managing to respect the original. Linstead's lively "God Rest You Merry Gentlemen" had me waiting for the castanets to sound, as the Canadian guitarist plays with his signature clave rhythm. I also loved Linstead's interpretation of one of my favorite carols, "Angels We Have Heard On High," which I am more accustomed to hearing with organs and/or pianos leading the way. I found Linstead's acoustic offering to be quite appealing to my musical palette.

Fans of smooth jazz music will delight in Lubeck's "We Three Kings," as he delivers a mellow, insightful arrangement that recreates a sense of wonderment and awe. The piano accompaniment was a nice touch. Michaud delivers one of the prettier renditions of "Hark The Herald Angels Sing" that I have heard in a long time. I particularly enjoyed the guitar riffs that bring the song to a close.

Other exciting Christmas gifts that you can anticipate unwrapping when you purchase *We Three Strings* include "What Child Is This," "The First Noel," "Away In A Manager," "Joy To The World," and two songs that I had not heard before, "Bring A Torch Jeanette" and "Isabella".

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