

JEFF MORRISON BREATHES 31 YEARS INTO 47 MINUTES

by
Joey Robert Parks

In the 1986 film, "Round Midnight," a jazz pianist named Hershell scolds saxophonist Dale Turner for playing "weird chords" that no one wants to hear. When Dale tells him he's moving to Paris, Hershell says,

"It won't change the way you play. You know what's gonna be waitin' for you at the airfield in Paris, don't you?.....You."

Local Tenor/Alto saxophonist Jeff Morrison returned to Phoenix in 1999. After a year in Chicago, he'd found what Dale Turner found in Paris. His vision clarified, he immediately penned the title track, "Rights of Seclusion", for his debut album of the same name.

It took fifteen minutes.

'Rights of Seclusion' was the result of "isolation, introspection and the desire to move forward," Morrison says. He writes when an emotion "builds up, builds up, builds up... then you're feeling so much and are able to channel that into a particular melody." The 3rd track, "Falling", was also written in fifteen minutes. "It's in the melody," Jeff says, "It's about falling in love. Those moments with a woman where all else disappears around you. This tune is a Tango; a very sensual, passionate dance."

When Jeff Morrison talks about his debut album, "Rights of Seclusion" (February 12, 2000), one is instantly aware of his passion for expression. He has a powerful vocabulary and an intimate nature that interact on a passionate, yet relatable level.

He'd make a great writer. In fact, his goal "for this album was to tell a story."

The band he's put together are storytellers in their own right: Eric Levy, Piano; Chris Champion, Guitars; Steve Millhouse, Acoustic Bass; Dom Moio, Drums/Cymbals. Although he's known and played with them for years, the band wasn't officially formed until last year. Morrison regards his band-mates with high esteem, "The songs are written out, but they're performed spontaneously. What's going on is a blueprint. It gives [each of us] the freedom to create our own musical painting in extremely introspective, emotive, emotional tunes. In my opinion, it's the greatest thing about jazz."

He says the reason Phoenix has been reluctant to embrace jazz is because "it makes most people nervous. There is so much raw energy in the music. It's so real and honest. How can it not make you feel?"

Imagine it's 1943.

You're in New York. 52nd street. People everywhere are walking down the sidewalk. You can hear the sound pouring out of the clubs. You can't help but drink it in. Now, how does a jazz musician recreate that in Phoenix in 2000? "I'm always listening to CD's at home, in the car, plugging in, playing out as much as possible," says Morrison, "It makes it hard to go to the practice room every night, when you know it's so hip, and it's not appreciated much here. Most of the great musicians have moved away because of this. They've got to make a living somehow."

When Jeff Morrison was growing up, Phoenix had a few jazz clubs, but he couldn't get in. He was underage. "Somehow," Jeff said, "the Melody Lounge let me in." It was on a Monday night that Jeff met Brian Sjoerdinga ("Shor-dinga"). Brian had studied in Boston with the great Joe Viola (master of woodwinds). Says Morrison, "He played with Buddy Rich, Stan Kenton, Artie Shaw and all those cats."

"Before that," adds Jeff, "nobody was teaching me anything. He took me in. Told me, 'you're doing this wrong and this right'. I listened to everything he said. With Brian's help, Jeff was soon transcribing solos of jazz legends like Coltrane, Dexter Gordon [who plays the lead in the film, "Round Midnight" and is a huge influence on Jeff] and Charlie Parker. Morrison remembers, "learning all these cats phrases note for note. He is still my mentor, but above all else Brian Sjoerdinga has become a great friend."

Friends are hard to find when a jazz musician (or any artist) is so focused on his craft that he sometimes becomes, as Jeff notes, "completely emotionally unavailable". Jeff also served as producer, co-mixer (with Clarke Rigsby) and marketer of the album. As Jeff recalls, "there was a record company that wanted to sign it, but the deal didn't guarantee that it would be available in stores. The bottom line is I trusted my instinct on this one."

The result is a very historically acoustic classic sound. With the addition of guitar, it remains completely accessible to modern listeners. Such reverence for jazz lends itself to even smaller decisions: like the bands name. Like old Blue Note album covers, Jeff chose his name by itself, over the present tendency towards a 'Jeff Morrison Group'."

On the last day, after everything else was recorded, Jeff went back into the studio. He wanted to do one more tune. He chose John Coltrane's 'Central Park West' because, "the chord changes create a very nice landscape, and a very poignant element of sensitivity. It was the perfect compliment to what we'd recorded before."

This year Jeff Morrison is looking ahead.

He's looking for a major label, national distribution and more opportunities to play out. Starting this month, he's entering the musical unknown every other Friday at Mulberry Street Neighborhood Bar & Grill (37th Street/Indian School) and Starbucks Coffee (Fashion Square Mall, Scottsdale) every other Saturday (following April 22).

Work has also begun on a follow up project. Jeff and Eric, the pianist, recently recorded six songs with just the two of them. Jeff said, "We hadn't played together since the recording date and there were these chilling moments where it was like one person playing two instruments." When Jeff Morrison tells you these things, you're getting a wonderfully poetic, culture-rich story. The voice of his soul, however, is secluded and built into his sound.

'Rights of Seclusion' is now available at www.amazon.com (real-audio samples as well) and Border's Books And Music.

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