



## MARSALIS MUSIC

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## BRANFORD MARSALIS · ETERNAL BIOGRAPHY

Many musicians create collections of ballads to serve as background listening in one-dimensional moods. Branford Marsalis is an uncommon musician, however and *Eternal* is no ordinary ballad album. The new CD, Branford's third on his Marsalis Music label, will be released on September 14.

As with most of his recording projects, *Eternal* is the product of much thought and sustained artistic growth. "Around the time I recorded *Crazy People Music* in 1990, I began to realize how hard it is to really play a ballad," the saxophonist explains. "One of the old-guard jazz guys had come up to me and said, 'Yeah, I heard you messing up the melody of "Lament,"' a J.J. Johnson ballad that I had recorded a couple of years earlier. The comment made me realize how certain people's jazz parameters had nothing to do with music. All that mattered to that guy was that I didn't play the bridge correctly. It made me start to think about what was important in playing ballads. I decided it was not just stating the melody, because Miles didn't always play the melody; it was playing emotionally."

Marsalis admits that it took a few years for this lesson to sink in, but he is not one for quick fixes. "I'm a firm believer in process over product, and I think my ballad concept finally started to come together on stuff like 'A Thousand Autumns' [from his 1996 album *The Dark Keys*]. It was a shock when two women came up to me on separate occasions and said the song had made them cry, because I had rarely heard that said about jazz before. The comment made me realize that the quartet and I were achieving emotional development as musicians. Playing a ballad had gotten beyond the typical jazz approach. We were manipulating the songs, not just the chord changes. That's what inspired a ballad album."

In collaboration with band members Joey Calderazzo, Eric Revis and Jeff "Tain" Watts, Marsalis developed a program that is both unique and compelling. "I didn't want to just play familiar songs or songs from a fake book," he says. "I was more concerned with showcasing each musician's personal perspective, and the music was inspired in a variety of ways. Tain said we had to do one for the old folks, something with a two-step feeling like his parents used to dance to, which is where 'Dinner for One, Please, James' came from. I had always loved Billie Holiday's 'Gloomy Sunday,' but never thought of playing it until I heard a European pop singer named Heather Nova sing it on the soundtrack of a movie called *Gloomy Sunday*. That inspired me, plus Sonny Rollins' approach to 'You Don't Know What Love Is' on the *Saxophone Colossus* album, the way he walked through a ballad. And I knew 'The Ruby and the Pearl' from Wayne Shorter's recording, but the song really registered with me when I heard Nat Cole sing it." The remainder of the program is comprised of a new composition from each member of the quartet. "Once we decided to do an all-ballad record, everyone in the band wanted to bring in a song," Marsalis reports. What resulted were three showcases for the soprano saxophone – Watts' "Reika's Loss," Calderazzo's "The Lonely Swan" and Revis' "Muldoon" – plus his own overpowering title track, featuring Marsalis on tenor and dedicated to his wife Nicole.

"'Eternal' stems from Nicole hearing tunes that other guys in the band had brought in dedicated to their women. So she started in on me: 'When are you going to write my tune?' But for me, it's not just naming any composition after someone; it's letting the music suggest the person. Nicole is complex, which is what I like in people. She's multi-dimensional, and when I wrote this particular piece, I thought it captured everything about her. I got a little animated in the studio when we recorded it, because it wasn't happening at first; but once I calmed down, we played 'Eternal' better than we ever had. I actually got goose bumps while we were recording. Most of it is soft, but it's simmering. And it's long, but there's no way that you can make it shorter."

On the subject of unifying themes, Marsalis notes that "All of the songs reflect the idea that there is beauty in sadness. Even sad songs sound happy when some people interpret them, like the singers who make 'Black Coffee' sultry, and there are other musicians who only approach a song in a theoretical manner. I was aiming for what Billie Holiday could do, which was to get to the emotions of each song." What has resulted is another triumph for one of the greatest saxophonists and quartets in contemporary music.

This ballad collection marking the second anniversary of the saxophonist's label arrives in stores on September 14.

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