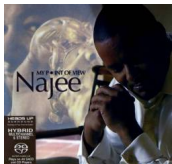


Najee - My Point Of View (2005)

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1 Sidewayz 5:33 2 3 AM Featuring – Will Downing 5:10 3 Fallin' In Love With You Featuring [Introducing] – Lomon 5:08 4 Back In The Day 4:37 5 Charm 3:29 6 My Point Of View 4:39 7 2nd 2 None 3:49 8 Emotional Featuring [Introducing] – Sisaundra 4:03 9 How Lovely You Are 5:15 10 Miyuki 3:55 Najee - flute, alto and soprano saxophones; Chris 'Big Dog' Davis - keyboards and drum programming; Will Downing - lead and background vocals (2); Wayne Bruce, Dwight Sills, Alvin White - guitar; Lomon - lead and background vocals (3); Rex Rideout - keyboards and programming (4); Dwayne 'Smitty' Smith -bass; Michael White and Greg Phillips - drums; James Lloyd - keyboards and programming (7); Sisaundra -lead and background vocals (8); Rohan Reid - bass guitar and background vocal arranger (8); Nathaniel 'Crockett' Wilkie - keyboards (8); Superb - guitar and drum programming; Khalil Parker - keyboards; Michael 'Dre Boogie' Edwards -bass guitar (10).

There's something about instrumentalists in contemporary jazz that can make a critical listener nervous. There's an expectation that the music will be bland, if not awful. Guitarists, bassists, and drummers don't seem to fall into this trap—at least not in great numbers. However, smooth jazz players of wind instruments seem almost invariably locked into creating formulaic music. It's as if executives have decided that if the word "programming isn't among the credits, an album isn't worth producing.

One of the latest victims of this practice is Najee. His new release, *My Point of View*, is a hybrid. In its attempt to please two crowds, it is at once a typical smooth jazz album and a straight R&B disc. Both genres favor the "voice"—either vocals or lead instrument—and don't seem to care what the supporting musicians sound like.

Of course, not all programming is bad. Marcus Miller has proven time and again that the right

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mix of technology and musicianship can be a beautiful thing. Others who have striven to make their programs sound not so much like programs include Rick Braun, Keith Newton, and Russ Freeman. Unfortunately, none of them appear on Najee's album.

Still, despite misgivings about drums that don't sound like drums on seven of the ten tracks, My Point of View is a likeable album. Najee's experience carries him for the most part. He began playing professionally at age fifteen. Over the years, he has established himself as one of smooth jazz's most prominent sax voices. And My Point of View certainly is within Najee's zone, mixing elements of mild funk, contemporary R&B, and light jazz. Supported by a variable cast that consists mainly of keyboardist/programmers (who wrote or co-wrote eight of the songs), a few guitarists, and three guest vocalists, Najee delivers a pleasant collection of danceable and romantic grooves. Among the best of these are the opener, "Sidewayz, which features Najee on flute, and "2nd 2 None, with the artist on alto saxophone.

However, from a straightforward contemporary jazz perspective, the best song is "Emotional. The sound is made cleaner by the presence of Greg Phillips on drums and Rohan Reid getting one of the few—make that minuscule—bass credits. Penned by Najee, his brother Fareed, Reid, and newcomer Sisaundra, "Emotional is a charming piece that fits perfectly in the urban jazz mode but could be equally at home as straight R&B or smooth jazz. Sisaundra delivers a powerful performance as lead singer. Her voice is like a composite of Toni Braxton, Chaka Khan, and Aretha Franklin, but with her own soulful qualities.

If you're not bothered by synthesized drums, you'll love this album. If, on the other hand, programming turns you off, you might want to skip it. My Point of View is nice, but it would have been much better if the artist had expressed himself free from the corporate forces that favor synths over instruments. ---Woodrow Wilkins, allaboutjazz.com

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