

Irvin Mayfield - A Love Letter To New Orleans (2011)

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The body of Crescent City trumpeter Irvin Mayfield's work might be considered "a love letter to New Orleans," and this compilation of his Basin Street Records recordings, assembled to accompany a book with each song constituting a chapter (it is available as a stand-alone CD and in a CD/book package), certainly makes that case. Drawing from such albums as Love Songs, Ballads and Standards (a duo collection with Ellis Marsalis), Half Past Autumn Suite, and Strange Fruit, plus Mayfield's work with the group Los Hombres Calientes, the music ranges from traditional N.O. "Indian" chants and second-line playing to straight-ahead jazz. Mayfield's different projects make for a range of music that is almost too varied. Strange Fruit, for instance, is a concept album about a 1920s lynching, and music from it sits oddly beside, say, the version of Leon Russell and Bonnie Bramlett's "Superstar" from the Ellis Marsalis album. But it all relates to New Orleans somehow, and the album gives a good sense of Mayfield's recorded accomplishments so far. ---William Ruhlmann, AllMusic Review

The album, issued by the Crescent City's Basin Street Records, includes seven tracks highlighting his time with Los Hombres Calientes — a flinty, multi-layered band co-founded with Bill Summers of the Headhunters — as well as sides with the Marsalises, members of the Neville Brothers and Meters, Rebirth Brass Band and others.

Ellis Marsalis, the patriarch of New Orleans' first family of jazz, sits in on three tracks, including a smooth reworking of "Mo' Better Blues," originally part of the soundtrack to the Spike Lee film of the same name. The elder Marsalis then adds a regal atmosphere to "Romeo and Juliet," and to the sweetly swinging "Super Star" — which also features the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra. (All three renditions were plucked from the terrific 2008 Mayfield/Marsalis project *Love Songs, Ballads and Standards*.) Wynton Marsalis plays in a trumpet tandem with Mayfield on "Blue Dawn," part of a trio of tracks from 2001's "Half Past Autumn Suite" written in honor of photographer Gordon Parks, whose works were on exhibit in the New Orleans Museum of Art the year before.

"We selected songs that tell the story of Mayfield's evolution as an artist," said producer and Basin Street Records founder Mark Samuels, who signed the trumpeter to his first recording contract at age 20. Mayfield has since won a Billboard award for Latin music at age 22 and then a Grammy last year at age 32. Work with Summers, I think quite appropriately, makes up half of this compilation, as the pair — rather than stoically ape the past — examined the complex web of backbeats and textures that informs every Bourbon Street riff.

"Latin Tinge II" finds Mayfield pushing into the upper registers of his instrument, like a bird willing itself as high as it can possibly go, even as Summers begins creating a brilliant racket behind him. There is just a furious joy to this song, originally included on 2005's *Los Hombres Calientes Vol. 5: Carnival*. The rhythmic, chant-based "Old Time Indians Meeting of the Chiefs," from the 2003 release *Vol. 4: Vodou Dance*, expands to include Cyril Neville, Donald Harrison and Big Chief Bo Dollis Sr.

Two lengthy pieces follow, beginning with "James Booker." Again including Summers, as well as Carlos Henriquez, the track features a curiously structured, absolutely note-perfect Booker-ish piano signature alongside Summers' tick-tock percussive propulsion. "El Negro Parts 1-3," with drummer Horacio Hernandez from 2001's *Los Hombres Caliente Vol. 3: New Congo Square*, is perhaps the most definitive reminder of the island influences that run over and around the New Orleans sound, like muddy Mississippi waters over the river bed.

George Porter Jr., the bone-deep fonky bassist of the Meters, stops by for a self-titled track that perfectly incorporates his old band's familiar grease-popping rhythmic soul. Mayfield, along with Neville and Davell Crawford, then duck into the gospel tent for a swaying, front-pew take on "I'll Fly Away," a 19th-century spiritual that moved from the cottonfields to become one of the standards in the New Orleans brass-band tradition.

"Mardi Gras Second Line," the third track pulled for this set from Vol. 5: Carnival along with "James Booker," is the perfect ending for any mash note to New Orleans — both in the sense that its a tandem polyrhythmic explosion of brass and drums and shouts — but also in that it has the feel of a backyard barbeque that, as the tangy scents from the grill begin wafting around, is all of the sudden attracting this ever more interesting group of neighborhood characters. By the time it's over, Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews, Kermit Ruffins and his former mates in the Rebirth Brass Band and John Boutte have joined in this hooting send off. As it builds (with the memorable line "shake the dust out your drawers!"), the sense of lasting crescendo is intoxicating.

There is a moment or two where you can't help but wonder if the song won't actually achieve liftoff, escaping the bounds of gravity. That's New Orleans for you. Every bit of it. ---Nick DeRiso, somethingelreviews.com

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