

Artist: Jennifer A. Johnson
Album: *Midnight Blue*

Reviewed by Matthew Warnock

Over the years there have been many vocalists that have set out to mix pop music and the jazz tradition in a way that would maintain the artistic integrity of jazz, while making the music more accessible to the general public at the same time. Artists such as Diana Krall and Norah Jones have developed hugely successful careers by crossing over between the two genres, using distinct approaches and varying levels of pop music application in their writing and performing. East coast vocalist Jennifer A. Johnson is aiming to recreate these previous successes with her latest release *Midnight Blue*, a collection of 11 pop-jazz tracks that lead the listener from the streets of New Orleans and New York to the beaches and clubs of Brazil as Johnson moves between stylistic influences throughout the record.

The album begins with the slow, swing-influenced “Midnight Blue,” featuring a distinctive vocal melody that tests Johnson’s upper range, as well as a short, but ear grabbing piano solo during the middle section of the tune. Johnson showcases her vocal personality on this track, one that features a unique vocal timbre mixed with traditional phrasing. Her vocal approach has been described as “Sarah McLachlan in the 1940s,” and this song is a good example of why this description fits Johnson so well. Her lines are phrased in a fairly traditional manner, while the timbre of her vocals is modern in nature, and unique in scope. This combination allows the vocalist to provide listeners with a sense of familiarity as she introduces them to her own unique take on the pop-jazz vocal genre.

Johnson includes a holiday track on the record alongside the Brazilian standards and pop-jazz tracks. “Christmas on a Star” is set with an organ trio and arranged to bring back memories of the great Blue Note organ trio records of the 1960s. The slow, waltz tempo is allowed to breathe and find its way into the pocket as Johnson floats her melodic lines over top of the rock-solid accompaniment. As well as providing a strong chordal pad for Johnson to work with, the organ also lays down a simple, melodic-based solo that, while not flashy, fits the mood and overall concept of the song perfectly. It would have been easy for the organist to dig into his chops for this track, as the tempo is ripe for double-time licks, but instead focuses on laying down blues-based melodies that lead the listener smoothly from the first verse to the second. Sometimes Christmas songs can seem out of place on jazz records, unless the entire album is holiday themed, but in this case the song doesn’t seem out of place, and is in fact one of the biggest highlights of the album.

There are also three Brazilian tracks on the album, “Black Orpheus,” “Gentle Rain” and “Dindi,” all of which are firm members of the Brazilian standard songbook. Here, Johnson digs into the pop-Bossa tradition of the ‘50s as she sings each song in English, rather than the original Portuguese. While the language is different from the original

recordings, this isn't necessary a bad thing. Often times singers will attempt to sing in Portuguese when interpreting Brazilian music and the results are less than stellar. In this case, Johnson plays it safe, uses a language familiar to her, which allows the vocalist to connect to the lyrical content and express these powerful words to her audience in a comfortable and musical manner, which isn't always the case when a vocalist attempts to sing in a foreign language, and they have to concentrate on the words more than the interpretation.

Overall, *Midnight Blue* is a strong release for Johnson. It is a relaxing mix of pop and jazz that brings a new voice to the genre while still keeping a reverence for the musical tradition.

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Rating: 4 Stars (out of 5)