

Artist: Jennifer A. Johnson  
Album: *Midnight Blue*  
Review by: Heath Andrews

Somewhere in time and space, there's a 1940's nightclub that's missing their starring act. Through some sort of mystical power or time flux, that missing band has reappeared in the present day as singer/songwriter Jennifer A. Johnson and her team of backing musicians. Johnson's 2012 album, *Midnight Blue* consists of 11 songs, eight of them original pieces and three of them some of Johnson's favorite jazz/pop standards. Much to her credit, the original compositions could easily be mistaken for classics thanks to her velvet voice, playful lyrics and spot-on arrangements. Each number is sung and performed to perfection, but there are times where the soft volume and similar sound can cause one song to blend into another.

Johnson's quartet of herself on vocals, Steve Johns on drums, Gregory M. Jones on bass and pianist Dave Braham take a very soft jazz approach to the arrangements. Jones' upright bass playing chugs along at a consistently slow to mid tempo pace and a majority of Johns' percussion work is tenderly played upon the hi-hat and cymbals. Together they form a rhythm section that is tight but mostly restrained; smoldering with a constant gradual burn rather than exploding with energy. Braham is similarly restrained, his solos tastefully concise and never too far detached from the main melody of the respective song.

Johnson as both a lyricist and a vocalist does an exceptional job throughout the album. Her sultry voice effortlessly glides through each song with control, range, and just enough power to sell the emotion of her songs without disturbing the mood they set. Basically, just imagine a voice right between Dido and Sarah McLachlan singing a slow, sexy jazz number, and you've got Jennifer A Johnson. What sets her apart though is her lyrical flare. Of the eight original songs, every one of them has something to do with the night, whether it is the stars, the moon, or the night itself. The rich imagery that Johnson employs conveys a different aspect of the night, from seeing a loved one's smile in the starry sky as told in "Your Smile" or the shroud that the dim street lights cast on the random passing by of two people in "Strangers Passing Through The Night." As repeated as the lyrical theme is, it never gets old.

Regrettably, the same can not be said for the music itself. Because of how strictly the band adheres to the soft playing and relaxed tempo style that is so identifiable with the soft jazz sound, several of the songs suffer from sounding too much alike. Just as an example, the title track, "Your Smile" and "Silver Night" open with Johnson singing almost the exact same notes each time, ascending on the third or fourth. Granted the melodies develop in their own way, but they all sound as if they could've been strung together to form one longer song. "Strawberry Moon" changes this up though by bringing a trumpet into the mix and creating a new sound for the listener to experience in this setting.

Fortunately the album gets a bit more creative after this string of songs, starting with the up-tempo, "To The Stars." Johns shows his ability as a drummer as he exchanges solos with Braham's piano. Naturally none of the drum fills are bombastic, but they do roll off the drum kit

with a good deal of energy. Even Braham gets to change things up by playing the organ on “Christmas On A Star.” This is another fine example of how putting a new instrument into the arrangement can add some extra vitality to a piece; plus it’s a wonderful compliment to the “hallelujahs” that Johnson offers up. More unique is how Jones plays his upright bass with a bow on “Under The Moon” and “Black Orpheus.” It’s a wonderfully daring move to take an instrument that was such a staple of the rhythm section up to that point, and completely change the way the listener hears it, while it’s still working towards the same purpose.

The only fault on Jennifer A. Johnson’s *Midnight Blue* is how it’s far too consistent in its sound for the first third of it. Once the band starts to branch out, the quality of the album raises up tremendously. Even without that, it’s clearly evident how much talent Johnson possesses as a vocalist and songwriter. If it weren’t for the album credits, you would not realize there was a mix of cover and original songs on the same record. *Midnight Blue* is a beautifully thematic CD that lives up to the rich history of the music from which it is derived.

Review by: Heath Andrews

Rating 4 Stars (out of 5)