

SPYRO GYRA

PROFILE

Since their earliest days in the mid-1970s, Spyro Gyra has always been about looking ahead, breaking new ground and seeking ways to reinvent themselves and their sound. However, this contemporary jazz quintet – saxophonist Jay Beckenstein, pianist Tom Schuman, guitarist Julio Fernandez, bassist Scott Ambush and drummer/percussionist Bonny B – has always understood the importance of not only staying connected to the roots of jazz, but also staying connected to the core values that define them as people.

What better time for this kind of reflection and renewal than the holidays? This year, Spyro Gyra celebrates the season with *A Night Before Christmas (HUCD 3145)*, a collection of eleven tracks that capture the yuletide spirit with a decidedly traditional jazz vibe.

“We’ve always had a yearning to do a record that was kind of a straightahead record – or at least something closer to a straightahead record than what we normally do,” says Beckenstein. “But it’s always been very difficult to make that work in the context of what we do on most of our records. But a Christmas record was sort of an opportunity to really go someplace a little more subtle, a little more acoustic and more traditional.”

Born in Brooklyn, Beckenstein grew up listening to the music of Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins and Dizzy Gillespie, and started playing the saxophone at age seven. Beckenstein attended the University at Buffalo, starting out as a biology major before changing to music performance. During summer breaks, he and an old high school friend, keyboardist Jeremy Wall, played gigs together back on Long Island. Wall attended college in California, and after both graduated, Beckenstein stayed in Buffalo’s thriving music scene, where Wall eventually joined him. This band, whose odd name has since become world famous, was first known simply as “Tuesday Night Jazz Jams,” a forum wherein Beckenstein and Wall were joined by a rotating cast of characters. Tuesday just happened to be the night when the two musicians weren’t playing other gigs that paid their bills. Around this time, a young keyboardist named Tom Schuman began sitting in when he was only sixteen years old, and remains a member to this day.

The group’s increasing popularity – combined with the purchase of a new sign for the club – prompted the owner to insist that Beckenstein come up with a name for his band. “It began as a joke. I said ‘spirogyra,’ he misspelled it, and here we are thirty years later. In retrospect, it’s okay. In a way, it sounds like what we do. It sounds like motion and energy.”

In their earliest days, Spyro Gyra took their cues from Weather Report and Return to Forever – bands whose creative flights were fueled by a willingness to do things that had never been done before. “I believed that we were springing from what Weather Report did,” says Beckenstein. “I never thought in commercial terms. I just thought they were the next step in the evolution of jazz, and that we would be part of it.”

Morning Dance, released in 1979, included the title track which became a Top 40 single and proved to be the band's breakout song. To this day, the Calypso-inspired track is still in heavy rotation on contemporary jazz stations. Meanwhile, the heavy touring that began around this same time has yet to stop, and a few new faces have entered the picture along the way: guitarist/vocalist Julio Fernandez joined the band in 1984, while Scott Ambush has been the bassist for 17 years.

Spyro Gyra signed with Heads Up International in 2001 and recorded *In Modern Times*, an album that spent 64 weeks on *Billboard's* Contemporary Jazz chart, peaking at #2. Two years later, the band released *Original Cinema*, followed by *The Deep End* in 2004. Both albums logged considerable time on the *Billboard's* Contemporary Jazz charts. The GRAMMY nomination for *Wrapped in a Dream* in 2006 reaffirmed the undeniable fact that these veterans are still formidable contenders in the contemporary jazz arena.

The band continued its ongoing process of musical exploration with the 2007 release of *Good To Go-Go* in the summer of 2007, an album that captures a more live groove with the help of Trinidad-born Bonny B. *Good To Go-Go* scored two GRAMMY® nominations in December 2007: Best Pop Instrumental Album and Best Pop Instrumental Performance (the latter nomination for the track entitled "Simple Pleasures").

"We've always had this belief that the thing we're doing in any given moment is the best we've ever done," says Beckenstein. "And we always want to maintain that philosophy, because that's what drives us forward. We haven't succumbed to the mentality of 'Let's just play the hits and collect the check.' We never saw ourselves as a pop band. We've always seen ourselves as a forward thinking creative outfit. After 30 years, it's still very interesting and exciting."

And festive, too. If Christmas is about tradition, then Spyro Gyra has tied both together in a shiny package. *A Night Before Christmas* might well be the best musical moment of the holiday season.