

SPYRO GYRA

PROFILE

“Life is being on the wire, everything else is just waiting.” - Karl Wallenda

The patriarch of the famous aerialist family certainly knew what he was talking about after a lifetime of thrilling, edge-of-the-seat performances for his audiences. While the stakes might not be as high for a jazz band improvising in a recording studio or in front of a live audience, **Spyro Gyra**’s Jay Beckenstein understands the passion that drives a person and makes “life on the wire” so appealing.

For more than three decades, the band has maintained a position at the forefront of modern jazz by successfully managing not just one, but several feats of creative dexterity. “That’s what has kept this band going,” says Beckenstein. “There are always balances to be found – between the individual player and the group, between the songwriter and the player. It’s about both satisfying yourself and satisfying your audience. And when you’re improvising in front of a crowd, you’re really walking down that wire. There are always surprises that way, but our openness to those surprises is what makes this band what it is. We just happen to be walking on a slightly more forgiving tightrope.”

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 thirty years ago 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 drummer Bonny B, a native of Trinidad. *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").

Spyro Gyra's 2008 release, *A Night Before Christmas*, a collection of eleven tracks that capture the yuletide spirit with a decidedly traditional jazz vibe, was recently nominated for a GRAMMY® in the category of Best Pop Instrumental album.

"My hope is that our music has the same effect on the audience that it does on me," says Beckenstein. "I've always felt that music, and particularly instrumental music, has this non-literal quality that lets people travel to a place where there are no words. Whether it's touching their emotions or connecting them to something that reminds them of something much bigger than themselves, there's this beauty in music that's not connected to sentences. It's very transportive. I would hope that when people hear our music or come to see us, they're able to share that with us. That's the truly glorious part of being a musician."

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