

# Najee

## PROFILE

In the ever changing music world, consistency is a much-treasured quality. Over ten albums (including two platinum and four gold sets) and a two-decade-long career, renowned saxophonist, flautist, songwriter and producer Najee has distinguished himself as one of the most consistently popular instrumentalists among both jazz and R&B audiences worldwide. Indeed, he quips with typical modesty, “People say I’m reaching the ‘legendary’ stage in my career. I just feel very fortunate to have been an instrumentalist in this business for this long.” The native New Yorker continues to provide quality music, which is evident in *Mind Over Matter*, his August 25, 2009 release on Heads Up International, a division of Concord Music Group. “I started out in the R&B world,” he comments, “and I made R&B-flavored records with the saxophone. Over time, some of that audience crossed over to jazz. In fact, I’ve had people tell me that my music was like a bridge from R&B to jazz, and that’s something I’ve been credited with since the start of my career. With this new album, I want to reconnect with my early audiences as well as appeal to the smooth jazz market with which I’ve been associated for a while.”

Najee’s goal is fully realized in *Mind Over Matter*, a ten-song set that features three special guests whose own appeal ensure an immediate and warm response from urban and jazz audiences alike. “I’m bringing associations with artists I’ve had the pleasure of working with over the years,” says the genial music man, whose diverse credits include a two-year touring stint with Prince. Specifically, neo-soul star Eric Benet contributes as writer, producer and featured vocalist on the sexy, finger snappin’ jam, “We Gone Ride”; smooth soul stylist and songwriter Gary Taylor brings his own brand of vocal magic to the standout urban ballad, “Moon Over Carolina,” one of his own compositions; while music vet Jeff Lorber lends his stellar artistry to two tracks on the album, the funky head-bopper “Stolen Glances” and “One More Thing.” For Najee, all three represent different aspects of his own musicality: “Eric and I have known each other since we were label mates (on EMI) in the ‘90s. We’ve done some shows together, and he definitely brought that neo-soul vibe to the record. Gary and I have known each other for many years, and I love the song he did for the record. Jeff Lorber? I remember listening to his music when I was in college and he brings such a wealth of experience with the retro-flavored tracks he did.”

Najee produced the balance of the album working with his touring band, and the result is a record that the energy and excitement his audiences experience onstage has faithfully been recreated in the studio. “There’s a natural energy we have together,” says Najee, “and I haven’t done a record with my own band since *Tokyo Blue* in 1991.” *Mind Over Matter* brims with highlights from the funky yet soulful sound that is Najee’s trademark on a cut like “Sweet Summer Nights” to the beautifully stirring and moving, “The Journey,” on which Najee is accompanied by keyboardist Darryl Woodson. “Forever And A Day After” has the mellow and warm feel of past classic Najee recordings while the opening cut, “Love You A Lifetime” is a pure and simple straight-up groove. “I’d like to think this album will appeal to audiences across the spectrum from smooth jazz to those folks who started out with me in the late ‘80s,” Najee adds.

Indeed, justifiably called a pioneer for creating a brand of music that fuses jazz and soul into something distinctive and unique, Najee first achieved international recognition with his GRAMMY®-nominated 1986 hit *Najee’s Theme* and 1988’s *Day By Day*, both million-selling albums. His trademark soulful

soprano with dynamic touches of flute and alto helped the New York born musician – who grew up listening to the likes of Miles Davis, Mongo Santamaria and Junior Walker, among others – establish himself as a mainstay in the music world. After studying with legends such as Jimmy Heath, Frank Foster and Billy Taylor at Jazzmobile in Harlem, Najee’s “break” came when he auditioned for soulful diva Chaka Khan and began touring with her in the early ‘80s. It wasn’t long before he landed his first recording contract with EMI, and with radio-friendly cuts like “Sweet Love” and “Betcha Don’t Know,” Najee found himself on the road with Freddie Jackson, Bob James and Hiroshima, among others.

Subsequent releases, such as *Tokyo Blue* (1991) and *Just an Illusion* (1992), went gold and earned him Soul Train Music Awards for Best Jazz Artist in 1991 and 1993. Following *Share My World* in 1994, Najee paid brilliant homage to another one of his favorite musical influences, Stevie Wonder, on 1995’s *Najee Plays Songs From the Key of Life: A Tribute to Stevie Wonder*; while 1998’s *Morning Tenderness* went to #1 on the Contemporary Jazz charts.

Building an international audience, Najee’s many career highlights have included performing at Nelson Mandela’s birthday celebration in South Africa and playing as a special guest of President Clinton at the White House at an event honoring President Jerry Rawlings of the Republic of Ghana. A collaboration with jazz greats Stanley Clarke, Billy Cobham and Larry Carlton resulted in the album *Live At The Greek*, and his two years of touring (2001-2003) with music icon Prince led to his participation in two albums, *Rainbow Children* and *One Night Alone*.

Subsequent albums have included 2003’s *Embrace* (which featured special guests Roy Ayers and BeBe Winans), the 2005 Heads Up International debut *My Point Of View* (with a vocal guest appearance by longtime friend Will Downing), and the 2007 follow-up *Rising Sun* (with special guest Phil Perry). Performing on a regular basis (but not, he recalls, “Like I did when I first started out, doing 200 dates a year!”) across the globe, Najee’s last few years have included appearances at jazz festivals throughout the U.S., Nigeria, South Africa and Indonesia.

That his special brand of music has universal appeal is unquestionable, and with *Mind Over Matter*, his third Heads Up release, Najee is back with an album that is soul-satisfying and rich in diverse musical textures. With the steadiness and fortitude that come with longevity, Najee is typically philosophical about future goals. “I’ve never had a major master plan – my career has been organic,” he says. Just, indeed, like his music.

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