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THE BENOIT/FREEMAN PROJECT 2

Truly both legends of the smooth jazz world, David Benoit and Russ Freeman in 2004 find themselves in the unique position of still playing a vital role in the development of the genre their classic music helped create. Featuring a more organic, live in the studio approach, ***The Benoit/Freeman Project 2*** is a beautiful, stylistically diverse departure for both, reuniting the two great friends and icons at the height of their ever-pioneering creative powers.

Ten years after their first all-out collaboration *The Benoit/Freeman Project*, and nearly two decades after working together on The Rippingtons' groundbreaking *Moonlighting* album (1986), the piano great and guitar icon (and multiple Smooth Jazz Awards winners) are still fixtures in the upper reaches of the Billboard Contemporary Jazz chart. Last year, Benoit's *Right Here, Right Now* went Top Ten, while *Let It Ripp!*, Freeman's latest project with The Rippingtons, hit the Top 5.

Evolving very quickly as only truly inspired works can, ***The Benoit/Freeman Project 2*** is a stunning, envelope stretching exploration of many of the musical loves of their lives beyond their usual funky jazz-pop trademarks—including the sensuous bossa-flavored vocal ballad “Two Survivors,” featuring vocals by country superstar Vince Gill, and the Latin fire of “Club Havana,” with the powerful trumpet sizzle of Chris Botti.

“Our fans had been wanting a follow-up for years, and we finally found some opportune openings in our schedule, which allowed for incredible bursts of energy when we got together to write,” says Freeman, who also co-wrote the title track to Benoit's 1988 hit *Every Step of the Way*. “We're so compatible musically, and this project, like the last one, was fueled by our desire to stretch and not worry so much about the kinds of music we make on our own. The idea was to do anything but our typical music. We wrote a lot of songs together from scratch, which added to the organic nature of the sessions. There was a lot of back and forth traveling from my home in Florida to his in Palos Verdes, California, but we really complemented each other. The first Benoit/Freeman Project was very anthemic, with big production values, but here, we're going deeper and creating a real intimacy.”

True to the joyful musical “tag team” nature of the sessions, Benoit—who helped set the tone in the studio one day by wearing his old satin *Moonlighting* jacket—naturally finishes his partner’s thoughts: “When there’s not the typical pressure of trying to make hits, there’s a greater opportunity to try different ideas. We both wanted to step out, be spontaneous, loose and less choreographed. The sessions came together very quickly, but we weren’t workaholics. We’d finish something and then go play golf or tennis or have a martini! And remember, this is the era where subtle performers like Diana Krall and Norah Jones are popular, so why not try to make music that sets a mood? The first Benoit/Freeman was all about exciting musical moments. Here, there’s excitement, but it’s more refined. There’s subtlety in the playing. After 20 years, we just don’t have as much to prove.”

Working with drummers Vinnie Colaiuta and Peter Erskine and the upright basses of Dave Carpenter and Byron House, Benoit and Freeman explore deeper aspects of their artistry, generally capturing the moment in just one or two takes. The guitarist was excited to depart from the intense focus on the electric axes that fuel the Rippes for the more timeless subtleties of the acoustic and classical guitars throughout; only two songs feature the electric. “You can’t help but grow as a player when you’re creating an album that’s anything but trendy, but which you know will stand the test of time,” he says.

On old school, soul-jazz influenced tracks like “Montecito” (which features gorgeous wordless vocals by pop legend David Pack, recently signed to Peak Records) and “Struttin’” (which also features Botti), the pianist rediscovers his love for Fender Rhodes, jamming with abandon on the classic instrument as he did on many of his late 70s and early 80s, pre-stardom recordings. The tune also includes an unexpected middle “breakdown” segment, which draws on Benoit’s straight ahead jazz roots.

In recent years, Benoit has become enormously successful conducting major symphony orchestras and composing for film and television. Many of the songs on ***Benoit/Freeman 2*** were written specifically with a sensuous, harmonic orchestral sweetening in mind—the lush romantic ballad “Via Nueve” (the first song composed for the project), the galloping Brazilian celebration “Samba,” and the recording’s two elegant centerpieces, “Moon Through the Window” (composed by Benoit one night while looking out at the moon over the Pacific Ocean, and featuring Freeman’s subdued electric guitar adding to his acoustic tenderness) and Freeman’s intimate closing track, “Waiting For the Stars To Fall.”

“Each of us had to have at least one song which demonstrated our skills as a composer, and these were them,” Benoit says. “To me, ‘Waiting...’ is one of Russ’ most incredible pieces ever.”

That's tremendously lofty praise considering Russ Freeman's tremendously successful and influential catalog of contemporary jazz hit singles and albums as both a solo artist and as leader of the Rippingtons over the past 18 years. Some of the sessions for ***Benoit/Freeman 2*** were done in Nashville, which is appropriate considering that the Galveston, Texas born composer/guitarist grew up there and was playing sessions in town (thanks to his father's studio connections) by age 14. The smooth jazz genre is still too young to have too many truly legendary tales, but everyone knows that Freeman—who had released his solo debut *Nocturnal Playground* in 1985—had no idea that the Ripps would take the instrumental world by storm when he gathered his buddies (including Benoit and future sax superstars Kenny G and Dave Koz) for a little *Moonlighting* session. Jazziz Magazine would later declare this as the most influential jazz recording of all time. Twelve years later, the Peak Records release *Black Diamond*, debuted at #1 on the Billboard Contemporary Jazz chart its first week—unseating none other than Kenny G.

The Rippingtons have dominated the smooth jazz landscape since the late 80s with their hit recordings *Kilimanjaro*, *Tourist in Paradise*, *Welcome to the St. James Club*, *Curves Ahead*, *Weekend In Monaco*, *Live in L.A.*, *Sahara*, *Brave New World*, *Topaz*, *Live Across America* and *Life in the Tropics*. 1994 marked the launch of Freeman's label Peak Records with his partner and longtime manager Andi Howard. *Life in the Tropics* was the company's first joint venture with Concord Records, and the label's roster includes the legendary Gato Barbieri, Regina Belle, Paul Taylor, Eric Marienthal (a current guest member of the Ripps) and The Braxton Brothers, among others. Freeman also recorded the solo album *Drive* in 2002, and collaborated with Craig Chaquico on *From the Redwoods to the Rockies* in 1998.

David Benoit's career as a contemporary jazz pianist began in 1977 and includes 24 solo recordings over the past 27 years. His 1985 radio hit "Linus and Lucy" helped launch the smooth jazz genre, and his early genre recordings, including his GRP Records debut *Freedom at Midnight* and its Grammy nominated 1988 follow-up *Every Step of the Way*, are considered influential classics. Among his other Grammy nominations are those for Best Instrumental Composition (for "Dad's Room," from 1999's *Professional Dreamer*) and Best Large Jazz Ensemble Performance (for the *GRP All-Star Big Band*). Concurrent with his burgeoning career as a conductor, he recorded 1996's *American Landscape* with The London Symphony Orchestra.

Benoit's orchestral music endeavors include the conducting of such eminent orchestras as the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the symphonies of London, Nuremberg, San Francisco, Atlanta, San Antonio and San Jose. He recently conducted the performance of his first piano concerto, "The Centaur and the Sphinx," featuring the distinguished pianist Frederic Chiu and the Asia-America Symphony Orchestra. His acclaimed symphonic piece, "Kobe," was performed

this year by the Berkeley Symphony, under the baton of Kent Nagano, conductor and music director for the Los Angeles Opera.

His most notable film scores are *The Stars Fell on Henrietta*, produced by Clint Eastwood and starring Robert Duvall; and *The Christmas Tree*, produced by Sally Field, voted Best Score of 1996 by Film Score Magazine. His long association with Charles Schulz and the famed Peanuts realm led to over ten years of composing music for Peanuts TV specials on CBS. He paid tribute to Schulz on 2000's acclaimed *Here's To You, Charlie Brown: 50 Great Years*.

His involvement as a guest educator with the Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation has taken him to classrooms throughout the country, where he has devoted many hours to teaching children about music; in 2001, he won the foundation's coveted "excellence in music education" award. He has also been involved with the Grammy in the Schools Foundation and was voted Music Mentor of the Year by the International Foundation of Education and Performing Arts (IFEPA).

"We've done so much apart from each other, yet Russ always brings out a deeper, artistic side in me," says Benoit. "***The Benoit/Freeman Project 2*** is a strong reflection of where I am in my life and career now, and I believe all of my talents are well represented."

"It's all about friendship," agrees Freeman. "So many relationships in this business don't last, but we're great friends and the mutual respect we have for each other shows in the music that we create and play together. It's a very inspiring process no matter how many years pass in between these collaborative projects."

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