

## MILES BLACK, JAMES McRAE, JENNIFER SCOTT & RENE WORST: “Impressions of Lightfoot” (Independent)

By David Morrison

The iconic back catalogue of Gordon Lightfoot is so revered that many of his classic songs have earned the status of contemporary standards, and as such have been heavily covered by musicians from all over the world: indeed, *Sundown*, *Early Morning Rain* and *If You Could Read My Mind* alone have received approaching one hundred known recorded covers between them.

Yet, despite their apparent melodic suitability for the jazz idiom, jazz covers of Lightfoot material are strangely few and far between. Holly Cole delivered a version of *If You Could Read My Mind* on her *Night* album, as did Diana Krall (with Sarah McLachlan) on *Wallflower*, and Phil Dwyer interpreted *Beautiful* in his ‘Canadian Songbook’ project, but to my knowledge there has never been an entire album of jazz treatments of Lightfoot songs. Until now, that is.

Conceived by Nanaimo drummer James McRae and, incredibly, recorded in a single day, *Impressions of Lightfoot* presents imaginative arrangements of the aforementioned four classics, alongside four other Lightfoot nuggets, and is I believe the first ever dedicated (i.e. non-compilation) Lightfoot tribute collection by a single group, from any musical genre. A wee bit of Canadian music history, then!

McRae is joined by Jennifer Scott (vocals/melodica), Miles Black (piano/Rhodes/saxophone) and Rene Worst (acoustic bass) for this project, the seeds of which were first planted in the drummer’s mind around three years ago. *Early Morning Rain* as an earworm led McRae to thinking of its potential for jazz improvisation, and the idea developed from there. In collaboration with talented regular local cohorts Nico Rhodes, Patrick Courtin, Marisha Devoin and Marty Steele, McRae created arrangements for fifteen Lightfoot songs – acknowledged classics and deep cuts alike – saying:

*“I try to adhere to the melody, but aside from re-harmonizing I’ve found myself changing the time signature, the feel and the rhythm...I like the idea of creating an altered song that lends itself to improvisation and interaction I associate more with jazz.”*

Gigs to hone and road test the arrangements followed, then McRae, Black, Scott and Worst entered Vancouver’s Carltone Studios on March 21, 2017, to lay down the eight tracks selected to represent the permanent record of the venture. The end result is remarkable to the extent that if an avid jazz listener encountered this CD with no prior knowledge of Lightfoot or his work, he or she would view this collection as a highly accomplished, classy body of stunning original compositions by a group of phenomenal contemporary jazz musicians. It really works *that well*.

In a nutshell, as inconceivable as it might seem to Lightfoot diehards that *Early Morning Rain* could bear a jazz-funk arrangement and a few bars of scat singing; that *Sundown* could be revamped into a slow-burning, New Orleans-flavoured melodica and piano-dominated instrumental workout; that *Ribbon of Darkness* (featuring amazing bass work from Worst) could be transformed into a loose, cool, swinging jam, or that *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* might benefit from a lengthy (and quite brilliant) drum solo, and be bookended by just its first and last verses, through imagination and invention *Impressions of Lightfoot* emphatically proves otherwise.

First and foremost, this is unmistakably a pure jazz album, and a wonderful one, but regardless of the originals finding themselves in so-called unfamiliar territory, it is also an extremely valid tribute to a legendary Canadian singer-songwriter and proof positive that, in the right hands, truly great songs can remain great songs, regardless of how they are interpreted. This nature of project can so easily go awfully awry, but with veteran musicians like these affording the material the respect it deserves, yet also running with their creative instincts, *Impressions of Lightfoot* is an unmitigated triumph.

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