

Miles Stiebel

Hummable Melodies For Jazz Enthusiasts

Artist Interview by: [Susan Frances](#)

Jazz music for contemporary times is what violinist Miles Stiebel provides to audiences in his second solo album *Excellent Distraction*. Produced by Bob Dawson who has worked on numerous Grammy nominated projects, and mastered by Ted Jensen, a Grammy-winning engineer with Norah Jones, *Excellent Distraction* achieves what Stiebel envisioned, which he describes on his website, "When I write music, I want to create an inviting and hummable melody, and set it to a catchy and hopefully infectious beat. I want the music to make you feel good so you will enjoy the moment even more."



Stiebel has performed at many prestigious events over the years, from Presidential galas to celebrations for foreign dignitaries, but *Excellent Distraction* required him to tap into his own abilities as a composer rather than relying on pre-existing material from other artists. Stiebel expresses, "I approached the development of *Excellent Distraction* with a more focused approach." He explains, "I wanted the overall sound to be contemporary pop jazz and wanted each track to have its own personality. I wanted the overall sound to be similar, but I didn't want every song to sound the same. The unique instrumentation of the violin lead conversing and harmonizing with the saxophone and guitar in different ways, as well as the different tempos and rhythms gives each song it's own personality."

Assisting him in finding each song's own personality was his producer Bob Dawson whom he tells was introduced to him "About ten years ago when I needed to make some demos, I was recommended to Bob by various musicians. After seeing, (and hearing!), him in action, I knew that when it was time to make a CD, that I wanted to work with Bob. There was no question that after his excellent engineering and producing on *No Hassle Miles* that he would also engineer and produce *Excellent Distraction*. He is a member of the band! Bob has excellent ears – it is amazing what he hears in the mix. He offered great musical ideas throughout the entire recording process."

Stiebel chose tunes to record on *Excellent Distraction* that would bring out the

complementary relationship which the violin has with the saxophone and guitar as he notes, "I chose 'Sir Duke' and 'Dance With Me' as the two covers as these are tunes that I have always liked. I thought that these tunes would work well with the band, and I am happy to report that I was right! Whenever we perform these tunes live, they are very well received. It is a great feeling to see people move to our music and they really groove when we play these tunes. People have told me after hearing us perform that they hummed these tunes in their heads for the next few days! So I knew that we should record these tunes for *Excellent Distraction*."

He adds, "The other songs that are on the CD, I wrote or co-wrote with guitarist Gerry Kunkel. These are tunes that I think musically complement each other on the CD, yet stand strong alone, and also go over very well at our shows. All but one of the songs for *Excellent Distraction* were arranged by me and Gerry. Keyboardist Dan Reynolds and I arranged the title song 'Excellent Distraction.' The horn and string arrangements were arranged by Mike Crotty."

During the recording of *Excellent Distraction*, Stiebel discerns that determining when the arrangements were ready to be recorded was a matter of instinct. "We made sure that we liked the the tempo of the song. It is amazing how just a slight increase or decrease in the tempo can affect the feel of the tune. When we perform live, the tempos might vary. We went in to the studio with an approximate bmp (beats per minute). Once we settled on the tempo, we played the tune through and chose the track that we thought had the best feel."

Stiebel admits that the recording of *Excellent Distraction* came after playing these songs live, so there were no worries about how to re-produce these tracks in a concert setting as he supplies, "We already played these tunes live on stage, so luckily that wasn't an issue. My concern was that the recording would reflect the energy that we produce in a live performance."

He remarks, "Right now we don't have a tour planned, although we have many one night engagements booked. We plan on touring in the near future. I would love to bring my family along if all of the schedules line up!"

The motivation behind *Excellent Distraction* was kindled by the positive reaction that he received after releasing his debut album *No Hassle Miles* as he beams, "I was very pleased and flattered with how well *No Hassle Miles* was received, so I wanted to release my second CD sooner rather than later, to carry the energy forward. That alone was a big motivating factor. My family was also a big source of inspiration for my music."

Though *Excellent Distraction* is somewhat of a sequel to *No Hassle Miles*, Stiebel did a few things differently on the recording. "For starters, I added the saxophone. Pete Barenbregge and I have played together for years playing commercial music. Not long after *No Hassle Miles* was released, Pete played a gig with me where we were asked to play both my original music as well as commercial music. He really added to the music and fit like a glove! I knew that he would now have to be a regular part of this band and on the next CD!"

He cites, "We also added the horn and string sections. We often play with horns and strings when we perform commercial and society music for private events. The horns really fill out the sound and add a new dynamic and vitality. The strings can be heard on three tracks. We wanted to keep the sound "real", so we didn't want to use a synthesized string sound. You can't beat the feeling emoted from each string player in the section – the energy and fullness is tremendous."

He provides, "The musicians that played with me on *No Hassle Miles* - Gerry Kunkel on guitar, Dan Reynolds on piano and keyboard, Steve Fidyk on drums, Mark Russell on electric bass, and Sam Turner on percussion are the same musicians that play on *Excellent Distraction*, and of course when we perform live. As well as being fabulous musicians, they are terrific guys. They have been very supportive throughout the project."

He assesses, "*No Hassle Miles* did turn out the way that I had envisioned, but there were a few surprising twists. In the studio we tried a couple of tunes with a different rhythm for the fun of it. We liked the end result and kept the track."

With *No Hassle Miles*, he recounts that regarding "the song writing process, I wrote a basic melody, sometimes with a groove in mind, sometimes not. I then tweaked it until I was happy with it. I added chords and tried different grooves. Gerry Kunkel offered alternative chords for various songs and also rhythmic ideas as we arranged the tunes. For the two songs that we co-wrote, 'Laughter' and 'Six Degrees Above Normal,' I wrote the A & B sections of the songs. We thought that the tunes might be too short so Gerry wrote the C sections. After hearing how they completed the tunes, I knew they were there to stay."

The two solo albums allowed Stiebel to listen to himself and fine-tune those aspects of his playing which needed polishing. He says about growing as a musician, "Well, just like anything else, I think that the more you do something, the better you will get at it. At least, I think that is the case in most instances! I like to think that this is the case with me with both song writing and playing."

He muses, "I have grown conceptually in my improvising ability by performing and practicing a lot, by listening to myself and to other instrumentalists, and by studying music more. This has also helped my song writing. There is always something new to learn! Working in the studio has helped me grow as a musician. On playback, I noticed nuances in my playing that I hadn't heard before. I either loved what I played or heard things that I wanted to change. You can learn a lot from listening to yourself."

Additionally, Stiebel fondly remembers several musicians who have influenced his playing, "Lots of diverse musicians have influenced me over the years - From classical violinists such as Jascha Heifetz, Isaac Stern or Yitzhak Pearlman to jazz saxophonists David Sanborn, Kenny G, and Najee to pianist Dave Brubeck and fiddler Vassar Clements, to name a few."

The most influential being, "Violinist Sam Levy, who was a first violinist with the National Symphony Orchestra, and who taught me during my high school years has been very influential in my life. He was a true perfectionist and a great teacher. I learned from watching him use his great technique and by hearing him play. He really moved my playing and musicianship forward."

He recalls about his own aspirations as a musician, "For years I thought about making a CD, and many people suggested that I make one, but I never got around to it. I was fortunate enough to stay busy playing as a full time musician. It was very easy for me to stay in my comfort zone, to not try something new, to stay guarded and not make a recording which could be subjected to criticism whether good or bad. But I had written songs over the years, and I really felt that it was the right time to make a CD."

He reflects about the musical experiences which have led him down this path as being imperative to his development as a solo artist. "Over the years, I've led dance bands for galas, Presidential events and weddings, led strolling string groups for embassy and corporate dinners, played for studio session work and in orchestras, backed up national

artists, and performed on cruise ships. I think that participating in these different musical experiences allowed me to shape and hear the sound that I wanted to try to create."

Miles Stiebel has performed with a number of notable jazz artists over the years including the late, great Ray Charles, whom he reminisces about proudly, "I worked with Ray Charles in the early 90's. It was quite a thrill – a surreal experience – It was as if you were playing along to one of his recordings and then realized that you really were playing with Ray Charles! To see him sing and play, and know that you were making music with him - What an honor to have played with such a legend!"

Not only has Stiebel played alongside great musicians, he is also the grandson of one. "My grandfather Lionel Falkman was a famous violinist in England and Europe. He was the orchestra leader and first violinist for the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova in the early 1900's, played with Maurice Chevalier, had his own Orchestra, recorded for and performed on early BBC radio, and made numerous recordings. My mom plays the violin and gave me my first violin lessons. Both of my daughters play the violin and get a great sound!"

He recalls, "I began playing the violin when I was eight years old. Before that I took ukulele and guitar lessons. I wanted to learn the banjo but it was too big for a six year old! I had private violin lessons until I was in college."

He has come a long way since then, and began his own company, MSE Productions, which organizes shows for special events. "I created MSE Productions as I saw a need for a reputable musical entertainment agency to provide not only top talent, but musicians and entertainers who were also reliable and dependable for private events. As a musician, this allowed me to play with musicians who I knew would not only be right for the job but with whom also I wanted to play."

He enthuses, "I am proud that we have so many repeat clients that use our services time and again. We work very hard to make sure that all goes smoothly, and it makes me feel great to know that both our corporate and social clients come back to us to use our services. I am also very proud that we make so many people happy with our music."

He gleams, "There are many terrific jazz musicians out there. Some are more engaging in their shows than others. I think Najee is both a tremendous musician as well as a great show man. He really connects and produces a great vibe with his audience."

He shares, "I think that the resurgence of jazz standards will continue, that we will continue to hear more rock classics arranged in modern jazz formats, and that contemporary jazz, which has various sounds within it's format, will continue to grow a fan base."

Contemporary jazz continues to evolve, and violinist Miles Stiebel continues to move along with it. Stiebel honed his chops as a sideman where he learned to play the violin as a vital appendage of the other instruments, embellishing them with gorgeous ringlets. As a solo artist, Stiebel remains solid, steering his focus towards the complementary tones that the violin provides to the other instruments, showing that their relationship is special and creates a harmonious blend which forms a pleasing esthetics. *Excellent Distraction* takes jazz music into contemporary times offering a classic spellbinding elegance and ebullient streaks which audiences today find titillating and welcoming on their senses.

For more information: www.milesstiebel.com

