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## Miles Stiebel's Jazzy Violin



The violin is often associated with classical music or as a fiddle, in the country or bluegrass genres, but in recent years the instrument has found its way into popular, rock and now jazz music. Miles Stiebel is on the leading edge of breaking the violin stereotypes, and the Reston Virginia native's new CD *Excellent Distraction*, provides ample proof that the stringed instrument can serve as a conduit between jazz, pop, funk and Motown. From the first few bars of the cheery, upbeat, opening track "Midnight Fly," to the Latin flavored "Mambo Number Miles," and Stiebel's funky interpretation of Stevie Wonder's "Sir Duke," it is evident that the violinist is an imaginative player, composer and arranger, whose music is far from self serving, and has at its core, a desire to be delicious ear candy for the listener.

During an interview earlier this year, Stiebel told Riveting Riffs Magazine that most people are pleasantly surprised when they hear how the violin is voiced in his compositions.

"A lot of people told me that when they heard that the violin was the lead in jazz they automatically figured that they weren't

going to like it, but at least they gave it a listen, and they enjoyed it. That has actually happened with reviewers as well. People who have come out to the shows have said that someone told them about my music and they weren't sure what to think, but they were pleasantly surprised. One of the comments that I get is people are surprised to hear a violin used in a contemporary jazz format, which is dominated quite a bit by saxophones and guitar leads, and they are surprised that the violin is being used in a way that works (in a jazz format). People have also told me that they enjoy listening to the music at the end of the day, if they have had a hard day. It not only makes them feel good, but it picks them up, relaxes them and puts them in a good place. It is kind of neat to know that your music can affect people in positive ways," says Stiebel.

Stiebel is conscious of the great love that many jazz aficionados have for the various voices of the saxophone however, he believes that there is room for the violin to lay claim to some of that popularity and share a portion of that top billing.

Listeners may find that the first two tracks from *Excellent Distraction* sound familiar as both "Midnight Fifty," and "Six Degrees Above Normal," have been featured on the Weather Channel, as was the case with his song "A Great Day," from his earlier album *No Hassle Miles*.

Stiebel says, "'Midnight Fifty,' is a tune for which I wanted to have a contemporary jazz feel, and I think that the melody is really important, so I came up with a good melody, and I set it to a beat that I thought would work really well. I combined that with the rhythm section and the horn section, to give it a distinctive pop."

As for "Six Degrees Above Normal," Stiebel says "I was also going for a very hummable melody or a tune that people would find appealing, but I wanted to give it just a little bit more of a pop jazz groove and with that arrangement, I also added a strings section. When I was writing the tune, I thought that it would be a good song for the violin and the saxophone to trade with the harmonies, and have conversations, while trading back and forth. It worked really, really well. I wrote "Six Degrees Above Normal," with guitarist Gerry Kunkel. I wrote the A and B sections of the tune. I was very happy with how it was sounding, and he loved it as well, but Gerry thought that the tune was a little too short, so the next time that we got together he composed a C section that just fit like a glove. I am really happy with the way that tune turned out."

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## ...Dance With Me...



The eighth song on the ten track album *Excellent Distraction* is a cover of the pop tune “Dance With Me,” by Orleans. “I always liked that tune, and it is a fun loving tune which is very cheerful. I always thought that it would work very well with my music and the combination of instruments that are in my band. I arranged “Dance With Me,” to make it a little different from the original, which it is, because right off the bat, there are no vocals and it gives it a little different feel. The violin takes the lead vocal part, and then it is intertwined with the guitar and the saxophone, which mix with the harmonies and the counterpoints. I always thought that it would be a great tune to do, and it goes over really well when we perform shows. People love hearing that tune, and we always get remarks from people who say that they love the arrangement and that we did a great job with it. Sometimes the saxophone

or the guitar will take the harmony parts that Orleans did.”

In talking about the fact his violin takes the vocal track on “Dance With Me,” Stiebel says, “The violin has been (thought of) for hundreds of years as the instrument that is closest to the voice, with the nuances that you can do, as far as the sliding of the strings and the sound of the bow. I thought that “Dance With Me,” would be a great tune to have with the violin as the lead vocal.”

There are many facets of this rendition of “Dance With Me,” that create a very live feel to the song, such as San Turner’s great percussion work and the saxophone solo by Pete BarenBregge. For the sax solo Stiebel pretty well left Barenbregge to his own devices and offered little, if any direction. Stiebel indicated that the band tried to recreate the same energy with which they play, when performing live.

Miles Stiebel dipped back into the pool of music that he grew up listening to when he made the decision to cover Stevie Wonder’s “Sir Duke. “I put it on the album, because we had been playing it when we performed our shows. When we play it, that song goes over extremely well. People are moving to the music and in the clubs people are moving their hands and clapping. Sometimes people get up and dance. Obviously it is a Stevie Wonder tune, but I would like to think that we have our own interpretation, and the way that the band plays it, gives it a life of its own. In the beginning of the song, you have the saxophone and the violin trading the melody, and it is almost like they are talking back and forth to each other. The energy level just keeps building and building throughout the tune. It’s intriguing and it’s alluring as it pulls people in,” he says.

The title track from *Excellent Distraction* once again features some great percussion playing by San Turner. Stiebel observes, “It is almost a distraction from the beginning, in the sense of being seductive, and you aren’t sure what is going to happen, then it builds up to the end.”

“The song “Excellent Distraction,” starts off with the seductive sounds of the synthesizer with its own unique synthesizer patch, and then there is a slight bit of the saxophone and the violin. Then you go right into the groove. On that track I also added a strings section, which I thought would be neat as opposed to having just the synthesizer strings sounds. (Real strings) fatten up the sound and give the song a new dimension “Excellent Distraction,” builds up as it goes, with the violin taking the melody first, and then the saxophone harmonizes with it, as it builds up. It becomes fatter and energetic near the end. It changes keys to give it a more uplifting feel at the end.”

Miles Stiebel has created a splendid album, *Excellent Distraction*, which boasts some imaginative original compositions and some new terrific arrangements for some older, more familiar tunes. It is a collection of songs that is well worth listening to and you may even find yourself hauling out your credit card to make a purchase through your favorite virtual store.

*Interview by Joe Montague*

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