

Written by Charles Waring

Wednesday, 24 September 2014 08:14 - Last Updated Thursday, 25 September 2014 08:28



AL JARREAU is talking fifty to the dozen and it's hard to get a word in edgeways. Not that I'd want to interrupt his flow; he's articulate and witty and flies off on wild tangents as if he was the jazz world's equivalent of the late Robin Williams - or maybe a Charlie Parker-like bebop horn player, blowing riff after riff in an effortless and relentless surge of inspiration. Given the energy he exudes, it's hard to believe that he's now nudging seventy five. He might be considered to be in his twilight years but the palpable sense of excitement that Jarreau transmits for his new album, '**My Old Friend**' - a homage to the late **George Duke** - gives him an almost youthful zest and vigour. "I go back a long way with George and I wanted to make a statement as early as I could before there's a kind of landslide of tributes and accolades regarding him," says the Milwaukee singer whose genre-defying music has straddled jazz, R&B, funk and pop for almost forty years. "My project may be early but I'm ten years late," he laughs. "I should have done this long ago and said something about the path that George and I shared."

THAT'S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR - AL JARREAU REMEMBERS GEORGE DUKE

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Jarreau first met Duke in the mid-'60s in San Francisco. They performed together for three years and then went their separate ways to build their own successful solo careers though at various junctures in the ensuing forty years their paths continued to cross. Duke, who passed away in August 2013, even appears via a brief keyboard cameo on **'My Old Friend,'** which is produced by Stanley Clarke, Marcus Miller and Boney James and features stellar vocal contributions from Dianne Reeves, Lalah Hathaway, Jeffrey Osborne, Dr. John and Kelly Price. In a lengthy interview with SJF's Charles Waring, Al Jarreau talks about his new album, his friendship with George Duke and other aspects of his long career...



(pictured George Duke with Al Jarreau)

When did you first meet George Duke?

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1965 in San Francisco at a club called the Half Note. It was when he was too young to be playing in the clubs. This was a new club opened by (Herman) Warren and Norma (Warren) who had been part of the jazz scene in downtown San Francisco in the Broadway area called North Beach. They decided to open their own place in Haight-Ashbury up Divisadero Street. In and out of there were people like Willie Bobo, Cal Tjader, Carmen McCrae and Miles Davis - who was over in the corner by himself - while George Duke, this young piano player was holding forth. They knew people who were in the business and opened their own place and had a clientele immediately. George Duke was their first piano player. Warren would tell you the story of folks coming to him and saying: "hey, there's this young cat that you've got to hear, he's a student over at the conservatory and he is laying it down. He's got a baby face but he play like Wynton Kelly and all the great cats." So he hired George and he had a band there. They did matinees on Sundays.

How did you start working together?

I was in San Francisco working days as a social worker and doing as much singing as I could. It was my dream, my love, and I was reaching for the brass ring as well as supporting myself by being in a helping profession which was wonderful work for me - and I would do it today if I weren't a singer. So on Sundays they had matinees and I stood in line with fifteen horn players, three drummers and one piano player who was coming to challenge George Duke. They asked me up to sing, I sang and the club owner, Warren, grabbed me by my sleeve and said "hey man, come here, I want to talk to you." Man, that's where it began, three years at the Half Note with George Duke. I remember seeing his mother wag her finger at him and say, "Warren, George has to play for church in the morning. You get him out of there as soon as he is done...and not one beer!" (laughs). I'm not kidding.

San Francisco was a becoming an important centre for rock music in the mid-to-late 60s

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Yes, the music we were doing then was swimming upstream as we discovered because we were in a rock 'n' roll world. Round the park there was the Fillmore with Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead, Gracie Slick and Jefferson Airplane and all of those bands that proclaimed a musical and cultural revolution which we are still feeling the effects of; a lot of our thinking today is based on those notions that came out of these barefoot kids from Berkeley who came over to this wonderful neighbourhood called the Haight-Ashbury and attracted kids from Chicago, Miami, Tennessee, and Milwaukee to come there and be part of this new way of thinking, which

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was counter-war. But George and I were headed in a different direction musically. We were finding an audience and packing them in. Not every time was packed-in but most Saturday nights starting at 10 o'clock they were there and we did three sets and it was swinging. Go to Ronnie Scott's today and they're doing what George and I were doing in 1965. It was one of the most encouraging shots in the arm and kicks in the butts for a couple of kids like us. George was saying: "should I be going in this direction? Or should I be over at the Fillmore Auditorium doing rock 'n' roll?" We discovered that there was a place for this music that is a little more subtle, a little more thoughtful, and has lyrics that say more than oopy-dooby-do I love you. The music we were doing was based on a repertoire of tried-and-true standards that represented cultural thinking and our cultural heritage. So it was encouraging for us to find that there was an audience for us and I know I walked out of there after three years and made the decision that this was what I was going to do full-time. So I left my rehabilitation social work and found a guitar player and started to write my own personal music and really explore simple little jazz things that I could do with a guitar player.

George went in a different direction.

Yes, George went off and played with Frank Zappa which took him in a direction that he inhaled and absorbed and came out in other forms. Certainly, in the work that he did as a fusion player, Zappa came out of it. And I think that's where he met John Luc Ponty, who was with Zappa. So that was the beginning of our kinship and a wonderful familial time that we had together that continued until just a couple of years ago when we decided to reclaim that period when I sang with the George Duke trio again. We did a series of dates over three or four years. So we had a long relationship and over that period there were various moments when I found myself at George's studio, him helping me with some music that I was doing on some projects. One of the most important ones was 'Roof Garden,' which we wrote together. That was a really important song in my career. On the record you can find a version of 'Roof Garden' and 'Reach For It' in medley form because they share some of the same funk. So I found a way of combining those two tunes. 'Roof Garden' was written during the same period as George's excursions with Parliament/Funkadelic. So quite naturally 'Roof Garden' and 'Reach For It' are related to each other and so on the record we were just real tickled about finding a way to combine those two pieces of music. We were thinking it was an experiment but we pulled it off. In so doing I think we found a way of reminding people that there's a similarity in those two pieces of music and I have an audience that counts on me every night to do that. George helped me develop an audience that comes every night to hear me sing 'Roof Garden.'

It's one of your signature tunes...

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Yeah, it's one of my signature pieces of music. And then George is sprinkled throughout on the recording.

He is much more than a spiritual presence on the record because he's actually playing the keyboard part on the Boney James produced track 'Bring Me Joy.' How did that come about?

Boney James came on board and we sat down and looked at the stuff that he would produce and it ended up being two pieces of music, 'Bring Me Joy,' and 'No Rhyme No Reason.' I saw a faraway look in his eyes, a glaze, and he was beginning to think, ah, man, what would be wonderful is if we could get George on the track. Of course, I've had a relationship with George and Rashid, George's son, and George's chief engineer, Eric Zabler so it was a question of going to them and asking them to open up the files. They did, and we got George on there, which was a wonderful little coup, huh?

Stanley Clarke produced several songs on the album. What was it like working with him?

Stanley? Fabulous. When Stanley, Dianne (Reeves) and Jeffrey Osborne came on board tears just sprang out of my eyes. That was God telling me yes, you should do this. Those were key people in George's life, who loved him and worked intimately with him in so many ways. So I knew that we were making the right decision to go ahead with this project when we got these three outstanding yes's from those guys.

Dr John makes a cameo appearance. How did he become involved with the album?

When I was on tour with George he played 'You Touched My Brain' and it just knocked me to my knees. It was so down-home funky. It stayed in my mind and so when we thought we'd go and do this record I was trying to think: this is a piece of music that I got to find a way to introduce to people. If you knew that song before you heard it on my record you'd be one of a few. Very few people know that George did that very bluesy, funky song (it appeared on his 2010 album, 'Déjà Vu'). So I thought I must let people know about this other George Duke, a bluesy George Duke. 'You Touched My Brain' - what a sense of humour is in that song, which can slip by because sometimes people like subtle humour and George was one of those people who loved subtle humour. So when it came time to put this on the CD, I got another gift from

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God that said: "Dr John! Dr John, I'm the night tripper..." The album is worth the price to hear him talk the front of that. That's wonderful.

Did you record together?

No, we didn't, we're victims of the new technology. We sent him the aspects that we thought were really important and asked him to just take his time and go about putting something together and that's what he came up with. It's a wonderful collaboration. Dr John and I got a chance to do a TV sitcom together called Touched By An Angel. It's a drama with Roma Downey, the Scottish actress in America who was a key person on it along with Della Reese, a jazz singer who co-starred. Isn't that my wonderful little twist of fate? So Dr John and I came on and did an episode together and it was fun to hang out with him and talk a little bit about music and for me to say "oh, man, I know your early stuff." So his name just came out of God's blue sky for this project. It was God directing the thing again and saying: "get Dr John, he's the one to do that." I fell on my knees on the floor. How could I be so brilliant as to come up with that? It had to come from somewhere else but Dr John nailed it, didn't he?

Absolutely.

Oh, he nailed it. It's one of the great, bright-spot moments on the record but just sends you back to the repertory: I want to hear that again.

You do a vocalese version of 'Backyard Ritual' that George Duke had originally written for Miles Davis's 'Tutu' album. Can you describe the process when you're writing lyrics to a pre-existing melody?

Well, you can do it without a thought in your mind. Or you can hear Joe Zawinul saying to you: "I thought it was fine without a lyric." (Laughs heartily). I wrote a lyric to 'A Remark You Made,' one of Joe's classic Weather Report pieces and was very anxious to get a reply back from him. I was hoping he'd say "Al, that's wonderful, man, I think we should record it together." But his reply was along the lines of: "there's no need to gild the lily, right? It's there, it doesn't need a lyric so what do you want me to say?" So somewhere between that kind of approaching this piece with caution and then just the daring that you can also arrive at even when Joe Zawinul says, "thanks but no thanks" - I took it with a pinch of salt and proceeded on to do the

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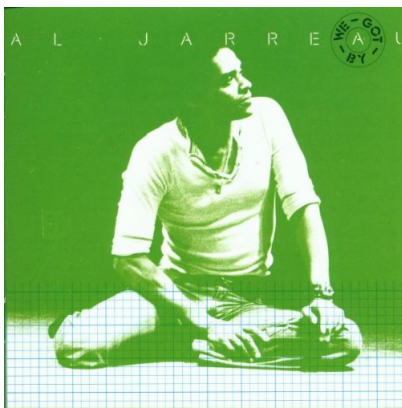
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unthinkable and take this dark, moody piece of music and write about the church in your yard. You can have a church in your heart, right. It will be a little slower, people get that, you know because lyrics float by most people for a while anyhow but it will get discovered and there will be a few people who go "ah-ha."

You worked with Marcus Miller on that song. What was it like to work with him?

Fantastic. Marcus Miller produced one of the most important records for me in 1993, 'Tenderness.' It was live. It was a very important record with a host of great players who came and played and helped out on that record. Marcus and I go back to bus rides with him and David Sanborn. He was a baby-faced kid playing bass on some dates for David Sanborn. So Marcus, boy, he's carving a space of his own that's kind of along the lines of what George did in its breadth and scope and it's wonderful to have him be a musical friend and a friend beyond the music and to come and help on this song.



Do you have a favourite album among all the LPs you've made?

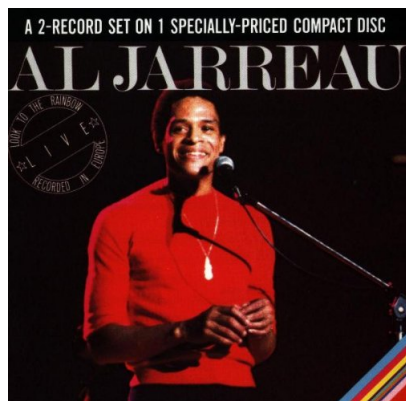
They would have to be favourites because of this or that or the other. Certainly I'd have to point to a couple of favourite early albums because **'We Got By'** was the one that got me out on the map and made the first statements about who this young singer was, who was a little bit jazzy, a little bit country and a bit rock 'n' roll. It was a very important record for me. It announced my coming on the scene and a lot of people still point to songs from that record and all the special

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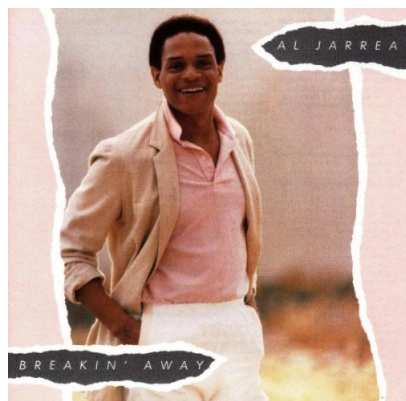
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circumstances surrounding that as a piece of music and the sentimental notion of 'We Got By.' It's still important and relevant as we speak.



Then, you know, shortly after that high on my list is '**Look To The Rainbow.**' That really showed me off as a live performer and an improvise singer/performer with jazzy roots. My first record 'We Got By' was very studio produced but on 'Look To The Rainbow,' my third record, is this guy there standing up singing like a horn (laughs). So a lot of people pointed at that record and went ah-ha! For me, that's the one because it is so improvised and so in your face so early on. That's how a lot of people discovered me and it's their favourite.

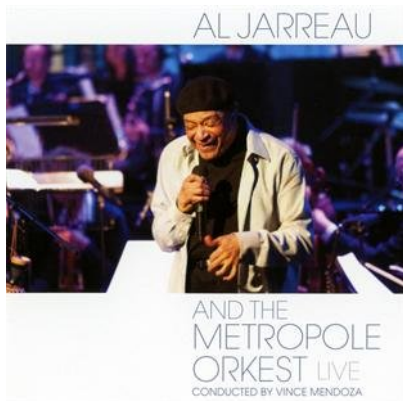


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And how do you not point at '**Breaking Away**' because it was crossover music that represented finding a new audience. I may have found some jazzers with 'Look To The Rainbow' and 'We Got By' and I may of had this handful of jazzers that were going "hey, he's one of our guys," but when I did 'Breaking Away' I sang this pop music and people discovered me as a pop singer with some R&B roots. That was quite a moment for me to find this other audience that I wanted. It was apparent to me in both earlier records that there were R&B and pop leanings in what I was doing. It was apparent to me and I thought it might have been apparent to others but it was a surprise to a lot of people when this other pop side popped out and I'm sitting there going, "well, what did you think was going to happen?" So those three things are surely on my favourites list but I'm telling you, I can run my finger down the rest of the list of records that I've done and they are for various reasons important records. How do I not put an asterisk alongside the Metropole record? ('Live' on Concord from 2012). That's an orchestral record and deserves a huge asterisk. It's music that people know as well as some new things but with an orchestra.



What was it like recording with a full orchestra?

Scary. I'm still shaking and my knees are still knocking. When we did several performances of that record my knees were still knocking. Vince Mendoza, what a great arranger. When we performed those songs I was still rehearsing those arrangements. Vince wrote them in an obtuse, left-handed style, and a lot of things that were not a part of my original thinking. He'd say: "Al, don't come in there where you used to do. I want you to come in here so we'll give the listeners something new and fresh and trust me it will be a great listen." So that's what I had to learn. And every time you sing with an orchestra it's a challenge but the result is beautiful. It's a new listen for people so yes, scary in some respects. Vince Mendoza is a master and wrote some stuff that finally did have the effect of making me shine.

Do you have any unfulfilled musical ambitions?

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Well, if we had been talking four years ago that would have been on the list, to record with an orchestra, and yeah, there's still stuff to do. Hey, man, just figuring out what the opening chapter of my biography should be.

Have you started work on it?

Yeah, I'm going to write something. There are some things to do. I'm really just finding my connection - I have my fingers crossed right now - with my Brazilian audience. That has been slow in coming. They fell in love with rock 'n' roll back in the early 80s and so traditional Brazilian music had to wait a while for them to kind of settle down and be open to who they are. And so I'm getting a chance to sing music that comes from the Brazilian tradition and introduce myself, kind of, for the first time to them and so somewhere in the future is a record that I'll do of some sort with Brazilian players. I'm not sure what it is yet but it might take the form of 'Brazilian Love Affair,' the record that George (Duke) did; something like that excursion with Brazilian music and me and what I do. So I think that's coming sometime in the future. I could come up with a list of things. I did a lyric for Bach's 'Air On A G String.' I've got to record that and I'm trying to figure out how to make that part of some project. But once again, it's an unnecessary lyric (laughs) but I think it will open that piece of music up to choral singing at Christmas. It leans in the direction of inspirational and sacred music. There's that and then I'm thinking of other projects I have on a list over there behind the other list (laughs). The main thing Mr Waring is that I wake up every morning full of fire for the work. I wake up every morning and I'm talking to myself saying: times-a-wasting, times-a-wasting and that's a thing to be grateful for.

Are you more conscious of time running out after you had a health scare a few years ago?

I had a little episode. It lasted 10 days. People made much more of it than it really was. I found myself in front of doctors who shook their finger in front of my face and said you've got to stop doing this and you've got to stop doing that. So I stopped doing this and that and then went out and did ninety minutes on stage after a week's stay in the hospital where they stabilised what was going on in my heart and wrote a song with Deodato called 'Double Face' and went in the studio and recorded that four days after I got out of the hospital. Then shortly after that, three days or four days, I went and did ninety minutes on stage and I haven't stopped since. But I bought a pharmacy (laughs). Oh man, if you saw the handful of pills I take three or four times a day you'd say "I guess you aren't hungry, Al!" (Laughs). So I wake up happy and I'm glad about the day and the music that I'll get to do and there's not much more you can ask.

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AL JARREAU'S NEW ALBUM 'MY OLD FRIEND - CELEBRATING GEORGE DUKE' IS OUT NOW VIA CONCORD RECORDS.