



SARA GAZAREK
Return To You (NLM-0967-2 CD)
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Championed by some of music's most celebrated figures, **Sara Gazarek** has emerged as a strikingly original artist with limitless potential. In follow up to *Yours*, her widely hailed 2005 debut focusing on American Songbook standards, the 25-year-old Gazarek delivers a sensational follow-up on her sophomore album *Return to You* (Native Language ---), seamlessly combining the intimacy of singer/songwriter stylings with the musical and improvisational elements of jazz. Blessed with a gorgeous, translucent voice, excellent pitch, and supple sense of time, Gazarek is steeped in the jazz tradition, but is not afraid to embrace the music that moves her generation.

Return to You was created by the same talented team that put together *Yours* (including Grammy-award nominated bass master **John Clayton** as producer, and her equally youthful, all-star LA based band, **Josh Nelson (p)**, **Erik Kertes (b)**, and **Matt Slocum (d)**). *Return to You* features well-planned arrangements of more contemporary standards by songwriters Leonard Cohen, Paul McCartney, Joni Mitchell, Harry Connick Jr., and Gillian Welch. Some of the best material, however, comes from Gazarek's acclaimed pianist, Josh Nelson, as he displays his considerable gifts as a composer and lyricist with four new songs.

In choosing the material for *Return to You*, Gazarek explains, "our live performances are very different from the record. We do a lot more up-tempo and swinging material. But we felt secure in the base we'd created with *Yours* and wanted to explore some of our other influences. We wanted this album to have a flow, and a sense of purpose, and we feel the listener will be able to pick up on the part of our souls we gave to this album." Among the album's stand out tracks are a playful version of Mitchell's "**Carey**," and a haunting rendition of Cohen's "**Hallelujah**," with an obscure final chorus that has rarely been recorded. Gazarek's knack for spotting first-rate material shines brightest on "**Northern Lights**," a ravishing song written by the brilliant tenor saxophonist Seamus Blake – a collaboration so poignant and engaging that no one should be surprised if the tune ends up spearheading a Norah Jones-like breakthrough.

"Return to You" also introduces a number of new textures and sounds, not explored before on the bands prior release. Strings, guitar, horns, and duet vocals are, as Gazarek puts it "a way to get a message across that we couldn't express as a quartet." And while the singer could have had her pick of all-star instrumentalists to feature on her sophomore album, Gazarek, who possesses an easy-going charisma that quietly commands attention, refuses to hog the limelight. "In this band we prefer to keep it in the family, and featured some of our most talented friends," Gazarek says, humbly, always referring to "we" rather than "I" when speaking of her music, highlighting the indispensability of her bandmates. "We truly are a family now, and they are an integral part of the way our sound has progressed." The quartet works together in shaping arrangements, and each piece is the result of extended collaboration. She notes the importance of this collaboration, "we are constantly learning from one another."

Born and raised in Seattle, Gazarek grew up without much exposure to jazz. She denotes any and all preliminary jazz education to her high school big band and choir director, Scott Brown. "He afforded us a lot of educational opportunities at festivals and competitions," Gazarek remembers. As a senior in high school, she was awarded the first ever *Ella Fitzgerald Charitable Foundation Outstanding Jazz Vocalist Award* at the Essentially Ellington Festival in NYC. "I guess you could say my first gig was at Avery Fisher Hall with Wynton Marsalis," Gazarek chuckles.

Sara made her way south to Los Angeles in 2000 and found herself at the prestigious Thornton School of Music at USC, studying under the tutelage of **John Clayton, Shelly Berg, Tierney Sutton, and Carmen Bradford**. While there, Sara helped develop the JazzReach program and, as a result, was able to spend 2 years working with inner city elementary school children as a jazz choir director. "I'll never forget that experience. It is so important to me to be out there, educating young people." Sara continues to educate young people today as the sole ambassador for the non-profit music and arts education organization, **Music For All**. Sara and her band give clinics at local schools while on tour, because, as Gazarek puts it, "education is such an important part of our lives, and the band and I know we wouldn't be here if it weren't for that one teacher who showed us the way. It is our duty to give back."

In 2003, Sara was awarded the 2003 **Downbeat Student Music Award for Best Collegiate Vocalist**. Shortly after the publication hit the press, Sara was asked to perform with Oleta Adams, Karrin Allyson, and Diane Schuur as the "as yet undiscovered talent" on the **Concord Jazz Festival** tour. Simultaneously, Gazarek joined a number of a-list clientele (including Barry Manilow and Allyson) as a **Stiletto Entertainment** (management) client and was soon being booked by the industrious **William Morris Agency**. "I remember feeling very nervous about it all," Sara recalls. "I'd had it drilled into me that a strong career at a young age was a fast track to obscurity."

Luckily, at a time when it would have been easy for Gazarek to lose track of her artistic goals, John Clayton, a mentor and teacher at USC, provided a grounding influence. When record labels first came knocking and she started to question her place, it was Clayton who set her straight. "He said, 'Sara, everyone has his or her own path, and there's no path that's any more respectable than any other,'" she recalls. "As long as you do your homework and keep striving to be a better musician, you'll have a lasting career."

Clayton agreed to produce her first album, **Yours**, and insisted she develop the arrangements herself with the band she'd been performing with. She found musical soulmates in her group, and the resulting record was a debut that was released to national and international rave reviews. It ranked in the **Top 10** on the **Billboard Traditional Jazz Charts**, **Top 10** on the **iTunes** top Jazz Album Downloads (US, UK, Switzerland, and Belgium), **#1** on the **iTunes** Top Jazz Album Downloads (Germany, France), **#5** on the **Jazz Week** Radio Charts, **#4** on the **HMV** (Japan) chart. In addition, Sara was voted the **#3 Best New Artist** in the **JazzTimes Readers Poll**.

With her strong sense of gratitude, this talented, graceful, constantly evolving, emotionally direct, label-pushing vocalist will continue to "do her homework." And judging by her second album, Sara Gazarek is going to have a lot to offer the music scene for many years to come.

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