

## Grover Washington, Jr. - Winelight (1980)

Written by bluesever

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01. *Winelight* [7:36] 02. *Let It Flow (For 'Dr. J')* [5:55] 03. *In the Name of Love* [5:31] 04. *Take Me There* [6:19] 05. *Just the Two of Us* [7:27] 06. *Make Me a Memory (Sad Samba)* [6:38] Arranged By, Conductor – Bill Eaton Backing Vocals – Hilda Harris, Ullanda McCullough, Yvonne Lewis Bass – Marcus Miller Congas, Percussion, Electronic Drums [Syndrums] – Ralph MacDonald Drums – Steve Gadd Guitar – Eric Gale Soprano Saxophone, Alto Saxophone, Tenor Saxophone – Grover Washington, Jr. Steel Drums – Robert Greenidge Synthesizer [Oberheim 8-Voice Synthesizer] – Ed Walsh

When Grover Washington, Jr. passed away in 1999 the jazz world lost one of its most successful and talented creators, and in his wake a slew of saxophonists have stepped up to fill the void. None have. Philadelphia jazz deejay Bob Perkins said, of Washington, a native of the City of Brotherly Love, "He was the originator of smooth jazz, and all the rest—Najee, Kenny G—followed him."

It is absolutely true that Washington was, along with George Benson, one of the founding fathers of smooth jazz and following the monster hit that was the Grammy-winning *Winelight* it wasn't long before the saxophone became, along with the electric guitar, the two most preeminent instruments in the genre. For better or worse (and there's an argument to be made for either side), Washington blazed a trail many others have followed, with varying degrees of success.

Within the crowded group of smooth jazz saxophonists there are a few originals following their own muse and blazing their trails of their own. Regretfully, the vast majority bland cookie cutter clones slavishly hacking out infinite versions of the R&B/jazz fusion of "Mister Magic" and "Just the Two of Us" without bringing anything fresh to the table. Smooth jazz is stuck in a rut of safe sax where nothing is risked and nobody wants to step out of their comfort zone. Real jazz is all

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about taking risks, not playing it safe.

Washington was not so much a daring innovator as much as he was a solid musician who had paid his dues as part of Creed Taylor's CTI and Kudu record labels, where the music was glossy and the album jackets were distinctive. Washington was labelmates with Benson, Stanley Turrentine, Freddie Hubbard, Bob James, Hubert Laws and Esther Phillips to name but a few of the artists on the CTI roster.

With his move to Elektra Records, in 1980 Washington uncorked Winelight. Predictably, it reached number one on Billboard's Top Jazz, but then it crossed over to other charts. The album went to number five on Billboard's Pop Albums, number two Top Soul Albums and "Just the Two of Us" reached number two on the Billboard Hot 100, and stayed there for three weeks. The album would go on to win two Grammy awards.

The quiet greatness of Winelight has not faded 35 years after its release. It's far and away the best album of Washington's long career. The slip n' slide funk of "Mister Magic" put Washington on the map, but Winelight was the evidence he could flat out play.

Washington would go on to record 11 more albums before his horn fell silent, but none approached the all-time high of Winelight. Not much of Washington's extensive catalog garners much airplay beyond "Mister Magic," "Let It Flow" and "Just the Two of Us," and that's a shame because he continued to make some interesting albums at Columbia which deserve to be heard. Perhaps this new reissued and limited edition multichannel 5.1 SACD release will rekindle a discovery of the extensive Washington discography.

The Surround Sound remix was produced by Ralph MacDonald, the renowned percussionist who also co-wrote "Just the Two of Us" and shared production duties on Winelight with Washington. MacDonald died in 2011. Other notable musicians include drummer Steve Gadd, guitarist Eric Gale and a 21-year-old wizard on bass by name of Marcus Miller.

The only complaint with the remastered release is the absence of any bonus tracks or new liner notes. It is a missed opportunity not to provide some details and insights into the recording process or how Washington and MacDonald convinced the reclusive Withers to provide the vocals for "Just the Two of Us."

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When most lists of the Top 25 Jazz Albums of All Time are compiled, Winelight is nowhere to be seen. It likely wouldn't make the top 100 for the truly hardcore fan who likes their music with a rougher edge than smooth jazz provides. No way does it knock a Kind of Blue, A Love Supreme, Time Out or Blue Trane off the list, but when the list includes the 25 most influential jazz albums, Winelight belongs in there as much as Head Hunters or Breezin' for taking jazz into a brand new direction even if everybody wasn't happy with where it went. ---Jeff Winbush, allaboutjazz.com

Grover Washington, Jr., has long been one of the leaders in what could be called rhythm & jazz, essentially R&B-influenced jazz. Winelight is one of his finest albums, and not primarily because of the Bill Withers hit "Just the Two of Us." It is the five instrumentals that find Washington (on soprano, alto, and tenor) really stretching out. If he had been only interested in sales, Washington's solos could have been half as long and he would have stuck closely to the melody. Instead he really pushes himself on some of these selections, particularly the title cut. A memorable set of high-quality and danceable soul-jazz. ---Scott Yanow, Rovi

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