

Czesław Niemen - Mourner's Rhapsody (1974)



- 01. *Lilacs And Champagne* - 4:02
- 02. *I've Got No One Who Needs Me* - 4:14
- 03. *I Search For Love* - 4:49
- 04. *Baby M* - 5:14
- 05. *Inside I'm Dying* - 5:32
- 06. *Mourner's Rhapsody* (lyrics by Cyprian Kamil Norwid, translation by Norman Simon) - 14:46

Music by Czesław Niemen, lyrics by Norman Simon.

- Czesław Niemen - fender piano, moog, mellotron, acoustic piano, moog bass, organ, chimes, timpani, vocals
- Jan Hammer - drums (01,02,03,04,05,06)
- Michał Urbaniak - electric violin (01,03,05)
- Rick Laird - fender bass (01,02,03,05,06)
- Don Grolnick - fender piano (03,05), acoustic piano (06)
- Dave Johnson - percussion (01,03,05,06)
- Seldon Powell - flute (02)
- John Abercrombie - lead guitar (05,06)
- Steve Khan - guitar (03)
- Carl Rabinowitz - acoustic guitar (04)
- Erin Dickins, Gail Cantor, Tasha Thomas - backing vocals (01,03,04)
- Choir under direction of Howard Roberts (06)

Mourner's Rhapsody - English-language album by Czesław Niemen. Recorded in 1974 in USA. Album was released in West Germany (1974), United Kingdoms (1975) and United States (1976). Album was re-released on CD in 1993.

Czeslaw Niemen isn't exactly a household name, even in the prog world, but this album is a bit of a hidden gem. I picked this up back in the late 70's at a used record store after a close friend in my grammar school passed away from cancer. I was looking for something respectfully mournful to play while I sat in the darkness of my bedroom and grieved, and with a title like "Mourner's Rhapsody", I figured this would fit the need. It did, but I also discovered a really charming jazzy folk album with some really beautiful music and a lyrical style by the Polish Niemen that reminded me very much of some of the soulful, bluesy singers of the late 60's and early 70's like Joe Cocker, Rod Argent, and Mike Pinera.

There are some heavyweight guest musicians here as well: Jan Hammer and Rick Laird from Mahavishnu Orchestra, Michal Urbaniak from Fusion, Erin Dickins of Leonard Cohen's band, and well-known jazz guitarist John Abercrombie.

The opening track, "Lilacs and Champagne", is basically a smooth jazzy tune, but Niemen really sets it apart with some funky Moog early on. Jan Hammer's rapid-fire drum work sets an anxious mood and the backing trio including Erin Dickins, Gail Carter, and Tasha Thomas add an early Motown-like vocal touch.

"I've Got No One Who Needs Me" is a vocal-intensive, soulful song of longing. Seldon Powell, an accomplished saxophonist and flutist who has to his credits recording work with Buddy Rich, Benny Goodman, Clark Terry, and Dizzy Gillespie, lends a hand with some very delicate flute accompaniment. This is a beautiful song that could just as easily appear on something from Luther Vandross.

"I Search for Love" kicks up the mood a bit, with chanting backing vocals and some eastern-sounding Fender piano and bass, as well as brassy percussion. The tempo changes keep the listener guessing as to where this song is going, and where it turns out to be going is into a choppy and strident jazz groove to bring it to an end.

"Baby M" introduces an acoustic guitar by Carl Rabinowitz, and more pleading soul lyrics from

Niemen. I have to say that over the years his voice has really grown on me, and it's a pity he didn't have greater exposure in the progressive and prog folk world – his voice is made for that type of music. There's an interesting Moog bass solo in the middle that is pretty trippy, especially under moonlight on a summer evening.

“Inside I’m Dying” features some really adventurous guitar work from Abercrombie along with an extended run of electric violin by Urbaniak. This actually reminds me of some of the earlier work by War and even a little bit of Santana. For what is supposed to be a jazz album, there are really a wide range of sounds on the front side of this album.

The entire back side of the album consists solely of the song “Mourner’s Rhapsody”, a fifteen minute male chamber choir cantata interspersed with jazzy guitar and piano and Niemen’s wailing tenor vocals. Niemen also plays both Moog and an upright organ, although the dominating instruments are Hammer’s dirge-like drumming and Abercrombie’s wailing electric guitar. This is not a song for the faint of heart, and not something that you’d likely listen to casually or in the car while driving down the freeway. This is definitely music meant to occupy one’s entire focus of attention, and is best served in a dimly lit room with very little companionship to distract. This work is based on a socially-conscious work by the 19th century Polish poet Cyprian Norwid.

Czeslaw Niemen’s career has alternated between folk/psychedelic, jazz, and social protest music. This album kind of hits on all three of these genres. It’s not an essential piece of progressive history by any means, but between the excellent arrangements and vocals by Niemen, the star-studded guest list of supporting musicians, and some rather simple but effective keyboard work (especially on “Baby M”, “Lilacs and Champagne”, and “Inside I’m Dying”), this is a very good album if you’re into 60’s style soulful singing, experimental synth keyboards, and jazzy guitar work. For that I’ll give it three stars and welcome Czeslaw Niemen to these archives. --- ClemofNazareth, progarchives.com

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