

Willie Nelson & Wynton Marsalis - Two Men With The Blues (2008)

Written by bluelover

Friday, 23 July 2010 19:27 - Last Updated Saturday, 09 September 2017 20:09

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01. *Bright Lights, Big City*
02. *Night Life*
03. *Caldonia*
04. *Stardust*
05. *Basin Street Blues*
06. *Georgia On My Mind*
07. *Rainy Day Blues*
08. *My Bucket's Got a Hole In it*
09. *Ain't Nobody's Business*
10. *That's All*

Walter Blanding Saxophone Carlos Henríquez Bass, Bass (Upright) Ali Muhammed Jackson Drums Wynton Marsalis Trumpet, Vocals Willie Nelson Guitar, Vocals Dan Nimmer Piano Mickey Raphael Harmonica

History has proven that Willie Nelson will duet with pretty much anybody who comes along, and while this open-hearted open mind sometimes backfires, more often than not it results in some of his most sublime recordings. *Two Men with the Blues*, his album with jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis recorded over a two-night stand at Jazz at Lincoln Center on January 12 and 13, 2007, belongs in the latter category, standing as truly one of the most special records in either Nelson's or Marsalis' catalog. If the pair initially seem like an odd match, it's only because Wynton long carried the reputation of a purist, somebody who was adamant against expanding the definition of jazz, which cast him as the opposite of Willie, who never found a border he couldn't blur. Marsalis mellowed over the years, but it's also true that he and Nelson share a common background in jazz and the Great American Songbook, so this pairing plays naturally, providing equal measures of comfort and surprise. The engine for this music is Marsalis' band -- pianist Dan Nimmer, drummer Ali Jackson, bassist Carlos Henríquez, and saxophonist Walter Blanding -- with Nelson bringing his harmonica player Mickey Raphael along, which is enough to give this a flavor that's quite distinct from a typical Marsalis session without being foreign. Similarly, this isn't quite alien territory for Nelson either, as the repertoire relies heavily on blues

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standards, including a pair of tunes he cut on his jazzy breakthrough, Stardust (the title track and "Georgia on My Mind"), plus he's always veered close to jazz in his vocal and guitar phrasings. All this means that Two Men with the Blues has the warm comfort of a reunion and the freshness of a new collaboration, feelings that are palpable as soon as the album kicks off with a loose yet nimble reading of Jimmy Reed's "Bright Lights, Big City." It's a subtle arrangement that doesn't draw attention to its unique touches, something that's also true of the flashier take on Hank Williams' "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It," which lurches and careens like a New Orleans marching band, coming to a highlight when Marsalis throws in a few lines from "Keep on Knockin'" for good measure. These sly spins on standards, along with a jump blues reworking of Merle Travis' "That's All" (first heard on a Willie Nelson record back in 1969), are balanced by numbers that are perhaps a bit more expected but are no less delightful, as "Night Life" is turned into a showcase for Wynton and the bandmembers sound as good skipping through "Caldonia" as they do laying back on "Basin Street Blues." It's music that flows so easily it's perhaps easy to take for granted, but Two Men with the Blues is truly something special, as it captures two masters enjoying their common ground while spurring each other to hear old sounds in new ways. It's a flat-out joy. ---Stephen Thomas Erlewine, AllMusic Review

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