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Jazz Musician Najee Talks New Music & The Other Side of Prince

January 5, 2014 by [TheBurtonWire](#)



Jazz saxophonist Najee talks about his new album ‘The Morning After – A Musical Love Journey.’

Photo Credit (Robert Ector)

Best-selling jazz musician [Najee](#) released his 13th studio album, [The Morning After – A Musical Love Journey](#), this past October. His romantic, 11-song collection is a project that gives the Jamaica, Queens-raised saxophonist, flautist and keyboardist a few moments to reflect on his artistic and entrepreneurial evolution.

Like every Najee release since his [million-selling 1986 Capitol Records debut, *Najee’s Theme*](#), the Grammy-nominated performer’s sound merges smooth jazz with grooving R&B instrumentals. Each album also features Najee experimenting with musical styles he was exposed to from touring the world.

Najee says via phone interview, “Jazz is music. It’s the ability to combine different elements with the spirit of improvisation and creativity. It’s allowing the music to evolve and naturally take you. You have to have knowledge of what you’re doing and a great sense of intuition,” he says.

The charismatic, 56-year-old instrumentalist, born Jerome Najee Rasheed, gets a kick out of randomly logging his album and song titles in his iPhone or iPad. His creative process, he says, is quite simple.

The Morning After, he adds, is inspired by his travels. “I wanted the album to reflect my experience. At some point when songs come along, I’ll just choose a title. As the album developed a romantic feel on its own, it started to remind me of the places I’d been blessed to have visited over my career,” says Najee.

A laid-back Najee segues into sharing a few candid stories about accompanying some of music’s most iconic performers. Along with his brother, the [New England Conservatory of Music](#) alumnus’ first job post-grad was with singer [Chaka Khan](#). The brothers were voted the touring band spokesmen. On a stop in New Orleans, Najee approached the singer about her tour manager wanting to make cutbacks.

Khan wasn’t too thrilled with the manager’s decisions. It was at that moment, Najee says, he realized he was an effective leader. “She understood how to take care of the people that supported her. She was great at that. I don’t allow my people that work with me to be abused or uncomfortable to the best of my ability,” says a chuckling Najee.

Keyboardist/composer [George Duke](#), who died this past Aug. 5, was the first musician Najee knew who owned a home recording studio. The two musicians would go onto tour and record together on numerous occasions. During the recording of Najee’s 1990 [Tokyo Blue](#) album, the musician was able to control and allocate his recording budget.

Najee, of course, followed Duke’s lead. “The first thing we did was build a studio in our home. [George] was a direct and indirect influence. I was grateful to him. Such a great legend,” says Najee.

Najee’s session work for [Prince’s *The Rainbow Children*](#) LP exposed the musician to another side of the Purple One’s mystique. During a recording session, Prince – engineering the session – stopped to entertain four children who interrupted them. On another occasion, the prolific artist and entertainer opened a \$10,000 account for one of the New Power Generation’s drummers, who was expecting a second child. Prince even purchased a home for the drummer and his family after he left the band. Quite impressed by Prince’s humanitarian efforts, Najee wants the public to know that side of His Royal Badness. “I saw the person aside from the superstar. Those are the stories neither nobody talks about nor nobody knows. Those are the stories I think should be told about him,” says Najee.

While on tour, Najee sat in on Prince inviting many popular artists backstage at his shows. The legend – [who changed his name to an unpronounceable symbol following a highly publicized battle with Warner Bros. over the rights to his name](#) – would often host workshops to encourage performers to take ownership of their intellectual property.

“[Prince] would always encourage artists to get into the habit of owning their masters. He was adamant about artists having rights to the things they create to give to the world,” says Najee.

The inspired saxophonist adds that he hired Prince’s attorney when his contract was disputed with [Capitol/EMI](#). “He was the reason I went in that direction. Ever since that time, every album I’ve ever done, we license it. I own the masters,” says Najee.

Grooming young classical and jazz musicians is where Najee is focusing more of his time these days. The winner of both [Soul Train and NAACP Image Awards](#) hosts [woodwind workshops](#) and master classes at various schools. His objective is to assist students with expanding their musical range. “I try to encourage young musicians to not fall into the trap of just being comfortable with what you hear on the radio,” he says.

Furthermore, he will offer private lessons via [Skype](#) or [FaceTime](#) this year. Adds Najee, “It’s the only way to advance yourself and have enough depth, knowledge and vocabulary to be able to separate yourself from everything everybody else is doing. Musicians can do a great service to themselves and others,” he says.

Overjoyed and still laughing to himself, Najee – still amazed that he’s gone platinum a few times – is proud of all that he has accomplished. He’s humbled by the love of his fans and still enjoys playing live sets. To Najee, the music comes first.

“I care about what I do and the future of our genre. I’m always gonna explore new territories of music. It’s a constant process of evolution for me. I have no complaints really,” says Najee.

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