

Speak Low: Chance encounter unites Boz Scaggs with the sound in his head

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Music icon Boz Scaggs, who grew up in North Dallas and was a member of the Steve Miller Band, was walking through New York City's Greenwich Village with his son one night. He had been working on a new CD, "Speak Low," but didn't quite have a handle on the finer points of the music.

"I had a few distinct elements I wanted to hear," Scaggs, whose popular hits "Lowdown," "Lido" and "Look What You've Done to Me" defined a generation, said in a press release. "I knew I wanted reeds, bass flutes and clarinets. I wanted to try to sing with the strings, but I didn't want it to sound like generic strings."

Prior to the fateful stroll through the Village, Scaggs met with prospective collaborators, but could not settle on a sound.

"It was raining, cold out," Scaggs said. "We walked by the Blue Note and heard music coming out of the club. It was vibes, a string trio and a couple of horns. This was the sound I'd been hearing in my head – exactly."

The sound turned out to be the Gil Goldstein Septet. Goldstein and Scaggs sat down together after the group's performance.

"We started talking," Scaggs said. "When we got together around a piano, that was it. We knew."



Scaggs and Goldstein knew what they wanted, and were careful not to overdo anything.

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“So many people in the last decade have gone back to the standards ... the list is as long as my arm,” Scaggs commented. “It seemed pointless to even go there unless we were going to do something to make these songs our own. We had to find an emotional connection.”

The CD's song selection ranges from a beautiful cover of Johnny Mercer's "Skylark" to a soft, sensuous take on Duke Ellington's "Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me."

Once Scaggs slowed down the tempo on the Ellington tune, he knew he was on to something.

“When we tried it like that, we were surprised at how the slow ballad tempo gave the lyrics more emotional dimension,” Scaggs said. “It's hard to sing that way – I call it 'jumping from post to post,' because there's a lot of area between the beats. But it really works.”

While Scaggs makes it clear that he doesn't consider himself a jazz singer – “sacred ground,” he calls it – he does his best to stick “close to the melodies ... I try to find my place inside the tunes, by adding little rhythmic elements.”

Scaggs is quick to give credit to the musicians who worked with him on “Speak Low.” Goldstein handled percussion. Scott Colley played bass. Saxophonist Bob Sheppard joined Mike Mainieri on vibraphone, along with a small studio orchestra, to create the magic.

“I'm so incredibly lucky to work with players of this caliber,” Scaggs said. “On every tune, we'd try different things, and they always landed in a really interesting pocket.”

Scaggs breathes new life into John Coltrane's ballad, “Invitation.” His arrangement takes you to a tiki bar on an island in the South Pacific, complete with Martin Denny-like rumba rhythms and a solid turn on the vibes by Mainieri.

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The title cut, recorded at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch complex, also has a lilting tempo, feeling more like a Brazilian bossa nova than the original ballad sung by Mary Martin in the 1943 Broadway musical "One Touch of Venus." Mainieri's vibe bridge is nothing short of hypnotizing.

Scaggs takes great care on "Skylark," beginning with just his voice and some soft bass backup. You can almost feel him tiptoeing through the score. Again, Mainieri's vibe adds a dreamy quality rarely found in today's music.

Scaggs turns to Mercer again in "This Time the Dream's On Me." If you've ever hit the jazz clubs in Savannah, Mercer's hometown, you've heard the ballad. This time, Scaggs and his crew brightened the tempo and took turns showing off their musicality, resulting in a rich, lovely three minutes and 37 seconds.

"Senza Fine," the romantic waltz recorded by Peggy Lee, Dean Martin and Connie Francis, makes you want to take your sweetheart by the hand, step outside and dance in the moonlight.

Scaggs honors the talent of Brazilian Antonio Carlos Jobim, one of this century's most influential composers, on his cover of Jobim's tender ballad "Dindi." The arrangement is fresh and new, and hasn't sounded this smooth since the 1967 album Jobim made with Frank Sinatra.

While there is not a bad cut on this CD, my favorite is "I'll Remember April." The song is full of love lost, but fondly remembered:

This lovely day will lengthen into evening. We'll sigh goodbye to all we ever had. Alone, where we had walked together,

I'll remember April and be glad.

No regrets. Just lovely and loving memories. Doesn't get much better than that. Thanks, Boz.

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More information about Boz Scaggs and "Speak Low" can be found at: www.bozscaggs.com

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This is the first in a series about jazz. Check upcoming editions for an interview with Melody Gardot, a look at Reneé Olstead's much-anticipated new CD and a feature on Miles Davis' classic, "Kind of Blue."