“ASK NEW ORLEANS” Liner Notes

AMY DUCKETT WAGNER

It was mid-October, …

So, you probably know my albums contain all original tunes written by moi, and arranged by stellar professional musicians who play in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. I compose the music and the chords and play guitar. Then, I try to surround myself with likeminded musicians and let them arrange the mood and instrumentation. As a songwriter, I’m always interested in the backstory behind the song. Lyrics come from a variety of experiences, my imagination, or inspiration. Scroll down for some of the inspirations for songs before the project kicked off. Once I was ready to make the album… It was mid-October, on my way to Blackpot Music Camp in Louisiana, when I parked on Frenchman Street in New Orleans to to firm up an ensemble to record original songs with. If you ever get a chance to spend Halloween in the streets of New Orleans – it is like being in a movie – these folks know how to do costumes and decor! Then, to make this album, the day after Halloween, I was in the studio with a French Quarter jazz trio. See what happens when you “Ask New Orleans!” The inspiration for many of these songs came from my travels.

The Song: Fight All Night for Love - When I wrote this song, I was reading “Their Eyes Were Watching God” written by Zora Neale Hurston with my book club. I was moved by the pictures her words painted about the lives of struggling African Americans and the need to find joy in life. Theirs was a hard life that often meant traveling somewhere new to get work in order to survive. She explained how hard people worked and how night life was an important social time. Her book was published in 1937 and Neale was an influential African American woman and author who was a central figure in Harlem’s Renaissance scene in New York.

A Good Man - When I wrote this song, I had been experiencing dramatic life changes and starting to envision a new life. I didn’t realize it was about me at the time. The song came before the realization that I must envision a new life.

Big Time - This song was written after a trip to New Orleans. I often say that everyone has a story to tell and I like to hear other people’s stories. Also, some of us tell it through song. Some of the lyrics were also enhanced by a Friday Night Jam group in my neck of the woods. I recall when I first finished the song and I played it at Friday Night Jam and all my musician friends spontaneously joined me,… New Orleans style. We had a Big Time that night!

What Shall I Do with You? - This is a dreamy tune and it started with that feeling you get when you have that “Aha moment” and realize you are starting to love that someone who is driving you crazy. So, it started with a sarcastic line, like “What the heck am I gonna do with you?” then it turned into a more romantic song. What I had in mind was something like that scene in the Music Man when Marian the Librarian is sitting at the window singing “Goodnight My Someone, Goodnight My Love…” She doesn’t want to name it or admit it, but she is falling in love with the man who is so irksome to her: Harold Hill.

Changed By Love - There are so many different kinds of love and this song is one idea that came to me during a writing session. A person can have a life-changing love and still enjoy living independently and carry a piece of that experience forward with you.

Photos of band, Frenchman Street, French Quarter, New Orleans, Louisiana: Amy Duckett Wagner Credits: Original songs, lyrics, music and vocals by Amy Duckett Wagner. Bill Malchow: piano, viola, accordion, percussion, horn arrangements. Aurora Nealand: soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, c-melody saxophone, percussion. Ted Long: double bass. Produced, Engineered, and Mixed by Bill Malchow at Yappy Dog Studios, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. Mastered by Brian Seeger. Cover Graphic Design: Sabra Guzman. Photography: Sabra Guzman, David Witchell, Amy Duckett Wagner. © 2020 Amy Duckett Wagner. BMI. All Rights Reserved. Unauthorized duplication is a violation of applicable laws. Booking: www.amyduckettwagner.com

Photos of band, Frenchman Street, French Quarter, New Orleans, Louisiana: Amy Duckett Wagner Credits: Original songs, lyrics, music and vocals by Amy Duckett Wagner. Bill Malchow: piano, viola, accordion, percussion, horn arrangements. Aurora Nealand: soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, c-melody saxophone, percussion. Ted Long: double bass.

AURORA NEALAND  
I met Aurora when she led an improvisation workshop in a lake in Louisiana. Yes, you heard me – she offered to move us all INTO the lake at Black Pot Camp for our class. Hard to describe in words the talent of this human. O.K. Here goes,… the cover page of her website has her playing in Absint - a quartet with Bill Frisell (Yes, I said Bill Frisell… This man’s catalog of chill music has helped me through my house trauma). My original tunes brought to life on “Ask New Orleans” only exists because Aurora Nealand agreed to play, suggested musicians and introduced me to Bill Malchow who played on and produced the album. Aurora is a tour-de-force, An established bandleader, composer, performer and improviser. Nealand has become a prominent force in the New Orleans music scene. On this release, “Ask New Orleans,” Aurora Nealand plays soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, c-melody saxophone, percussion, and arranged with Ted Long to play double bass.

She is most recognized for her performance on saxophones, clarinet and vocals and has been at the forefront of the revival of New Orleans Traditional Jazz amongst the younger generation of the city’s musicians. Nealand has performed extensively in New Orleans at clubs, in the Jazz and Heritage Fest, FrenchQuarter Fest and Satchmo Fest. She has also performed frequently in New York City at Lincoln Center Summer Festival in NYC, the BlueNote, Knitting Factory, Barbes and has premiered original works at Symphony Space and Alice Tully Hall, in addition to touring internationally. Combining the “formal education” – a music composition degree from Oberlin Conservatory and training at the Jacques Lecoq School of Physical Theatre in Paris – with the “informal” experience of playing music in the streets and clubs of New Orleans and throughout the northern Hemisphere, Nealand has emerged as an innovative, sensitive and daring music creator and performer. And then there’s the stage show Aurora created called “Kindhumankind” – a performance art show set to her original music in NOLA. See links below.

“Aurora Nealand is all over the current New Orleans music scene. She seemed to emerge out of nowhere. Some of her appeal is that she has a humble nature, coupled with a fiery attack when she plays, and a real fearlessness about taking risks and getting involved. She plays solo performances with a gas mask and an accordion. You’ll see her playing soprano sax and clarinet exchanges at Preservation Hall with her traditional jazz band The Royal Roses. You’ll see her playing duos, trios or performing her own original compositions at the Ogden Museum of Art. These are just a few of the interesting things she gets up to. I have seen her under deeper cover than that, and been amazed at how easily she blends in or stands out. Whatever style she is playing, she becomes the Music.” – New Orleans Presents London Swing Festival, Barcelona Swing Out, and has toured several times around Irealand, Sweden, Germany , France and the Balkans. (from her website: auroranealand.com)

So, as a gal that reads all liner notes, here’s some background on those in the studio musicians who brought this album’s arrangement to life. First, Bill Malchow (and his sidekick Buster, the coolest little dog in the studio\*).

The inimitable Bill Malchow acted as Musical Director, performed, produced, engineered the album “Ask New Orleans” at Yappy Dog Studios, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA What’s more, Bill plays piano, viola, accordion, percussion, and does horn arrangements on this release. Bill arranged for Brian Seeger, Professor of Music – Jazz at University of New Orleans to mix it.

A Roots pianist and vocalist, Bill Malchow divides his time between the Big Apple and the Big Easy—which sounds about right, since his percolating, second-line style bubbles and boils with Fats Waller-style Harlem stride and the steaming New Orleans sounds of Dr. John, James Booker, Allen Toussaint, and Professor Longhair. I read that Allen Toussaint gave Bill high compliments on his piano playing. (Sigh.) A multi-instrumentalist and vocalist, Bill plays piano, Hammond organ, accordion, and all other keyboards, including soloing James Booker-style. He is a band leader for his band Bill Malchow & the Go Cup All Stars with a repertoire of New Orleans R&B. Bill acts as a studio musician, and musical director for bands such as Alex McMurray, Aurora Nealand and the Royal Roses, Johnny Sketch and the Dirty Notes, Tommy Malone Band, King James and the Special Men, Paul Sanchez, Dave Jordan, Lynn Drury, The Jack Grace Band, Shannon McNally, Bubble, Beatlestock, Andrew Vladeck, Johanna Stahley, and David Kolker. (from his website: billmalchow.com)

\*Buster the pup declined to be interviewed, but one look from those brown eyes, makes you believe he loves the music.

https://www.facebook.com/BillMalchowMusic/photos/a.10152008790334908/10157405607489908

Mastered by Brian Seeger. Photography: Amy Duckett Wagner.

Funny story

8. The Graphics

Woohoo! Hats off to Sabra Guzman for creating the album art for “Ask New Orleans.” Many thanks! I met Sabra through the vibrant southwest Louisiana music scene, quite the creative musician, photographer and graphic designer. While she was on break from performing at Folk Alliance International shows in New Orleans, Louisiana, she gathered pictures like jewels: colorful houses, street art and decor around the French Quarter. Sabra became intrigued with the blue and white tiles that spell the street names that are imbedded in the concrete at corners in the historic district. She thought of using these tiles to create the album title and overlayed it on her other favorite shots from that week. When I saw her vision, I just said “OK, Let’s do that!” and promptly put aside my whole folder of ideas and my photos for the album art! You’ll like the music of Sabra, a solid musician. She and her Louisana Honky Tonk band, The Get Rights (including Grammy winning Louisiana legends) are in the process of recording an album,… you can visit her website for the Gofundme and graphic design portfolio. Sabra Guzmán has always been drawn to the rawness and DIY stylings of traditional roots music. First honing her musical chops on electric bass during the 1990's post-punk era with The Nigels, she felt a parallel between these first musical influences and the burgeoning old-time and country music scene she partook in while living in Portland Oregon in the late 90s, and the San Francisco Bay Area during the early 2000's. While falling in love with The Carter Family and Lefty Frizzell while DJing a country roots music program at Berkeley’s KALX in 2002, Sabra took up the guitar and became a part of bands like The Mercury Dimes and The Crooked Jades. Her instrumental and vocal cues are inspired by the likes of Mother Maybelle Carter, The Louvin Brothers, Lydia Mendoza, k.d. Lang, Ray Price, and Jean Shepard. After moving to the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia, she co-founded the award winning old-time band Old Sledge with Chance McCoy (Old Crow Medicine Show) in 2009, and received a coveted first place blue ribbon for Traditional Old Time band at the Clifftop Appalachian Stringband Festival. Upon deciding to move to Lafayette Louisiana in 2015 after having visited for the last ten years, Sabra immediately became involved in the music & art scene of Southwest Louisiana. During Lafayette's summer of 2015, Sabra formed her all-star honky tonk band Sabra & The Get Rights, which has become a staple for the Lafayette & New Orleans' dance floors. Currently, she is working on her first solo album (releasing Spring/Summer 2020), and while at home in SW Louisiana, she spends time working on Bill Wither bass lines, messing with moody pedals and her electric guitar, and performing with her Latin band, Sabra & her Latin Playboys. She also tours with singer-songwriter-country artist Esther Rose (New Orleans), providing bass and harmonies. Sabra always brings with her a unique approach and high level of musicianship, and is known for her solid guitar and bass skills, her unique vocal stylings, and her captivating stage presence. She has worked with fellow roots musicians such as Grammy-nominated Cedric Watson, Grammy award-winning Joel Savoy, Riley Baugus, Dirk Powell, and David Greely, and played upright bass for Mandolin Orange and bass for The Daiquiri Queens. She has been featured nationally and internationally at many prestigious venues and festivals, sharing the stage with artists such as Dale Watson, Devil Makes Three, and Pokey LaFarge. (From her website: www.sabraguzman.com)