

Toronto Pianist-Composer Jim Clayton Travels to New Orleans To Create Inspired Concept Album, *Songs My Daughter Knows* January 14, 2014 Release on Clay-Tone Records



After scoring successes as co-leader of **The Clayton/Scott Group**, which won three national awards in his native Canada, pianist-composer **Jim Clayton** decided to delve into more personal territory on his most recent project, **SONGS MY DAUGHTER KNOWS** (Clay-Tone Records, January 14, 2014 release). Traveling from his base in Toronto to his beloved New Orleans, where he and his wife Tracey had spent some cherished vacation time and were also married, Clayton assembled his Crescent City dream band, including drummer **Jason Marsalis**, percussionist **Bill Summers**, trumpeter **Marlon Jordan** and bassist **Peter Harris**, for a quick studio session in May 2013. Dedicated to and inspired by his daughter Eileen Agnes “Lenny” Clayton, who was not yet three at the time of the recording, **Songs My Daughter Knows** includes clever re-imaginings of familiar tunes from the PBS children’s show **Sesame Street** (composed by Joe Raposo) along with interpretive takes on jazz standards that captured his daughter’s ear during her first year. “It’s a musical scrapbook for Lenny, done in our favorite musical place,” says the native of Sarnia, Ontario.

Whether it’s the rollicking second line groove on “Grouch Anthem” (sung by Oscar the Grouch on the 1985 movie *Follow That Bird*), the bossa nova flavored “I Have a Little Plant” (originally sung by *Sesame Street*’s Ernie), the Professor Longhair inspired mambo boogie rendition of “Sing” (originally sung by Bob McGrath from *Sesame Street* in the show’s early stages) or their lightly swinging take on “The Rainbow Connection” (originally sung by Jim Henson as Kermit the Frog), Clayton and his stellar crew recast catchy melodies through a jazz prism.

Other numbers on the 10-tune collection resonate with deep meaning for the pianist, his wife Tracey and daughter Lenny. Count Basie’s vibrant “Flight of the Foo Birds” (from 1958’s *The Atomic Mr. Basie*) served as the soundtrack for a montage of home movie footage that Clayton put together of his daughter in various modes of play. The oft-covered Tin Pan Alley number “Tea for Two” (which dates back to 1925) served as a lullaby for his baby daughter while the jazz standard “Autumn Leaves” was a tune played in the recovery room after Lenny’s birth. The opening drum cadence from the main theme to Aaron Sorkin’s acclaimed TV series *The West Wing* was another musical tidbit that caught Lenny’s ear, as was the Dirty Dozen Brass Band’s rendition of the Cannonball Adderley tune “Inside Straight.” Clayton’s lone original here, “Little Leo,” is named for Lenny’s astrological sign and written to the chord changes to George Gershwin’s “Summertime.”

Clayton’s love of New Orleans (and his daughter Lenny) shines through on this remarkable recording. “I’m not good at keeping a ‘baby book’,” he says. “We don’t have a scrapbook with a clipping from her first haircut, or that sort of thing. But I did notice her reactions, which were always big for me. The first time she laughed, I wrote down the date and we celebrate it like a birthday. October 27 is her ‘laugh-iversary’. And I saw her reactions to music too. As soon as she was big enough to hold up her head, the opening snare drum at the beginning of *The West Wing* would make her look up at the TV. Whenever she responded to a song, or a particular tune cheered her up, I made a mental note of it.”

While Clayton considered recording this music in Toronto and just burning copies for immediate family and friends and people who knew Lenny, his wife Tracey encouraged him to put it out for commercial release. “Initially I thought I was going to do it with my musician friends here in Toronto, and it was Marlon Jordan who suggested recording in New Orleans. I was chatting with him between sets at Sweet Lorraine’s in the Marigny, telling him how awesome the New Orleans scene was and how energized I felt being there.

And he said, 'Why don't you make an album down here?' So he planted the idea. Then just a week before the session, I bumped into him again and extended the invite, and he wound up guesting on two tunes. I was happy to have him on the session."

Clayton admits to being slightly intimidated at first during the session held at The Music Shed in the Garden District. "Here I was, a kid from Sarnia, Ontario. And just being in the same room with these amazing musicians...if I dwelled on it, it could get overwhelming. I mean, we listened to Bill in my college jazz history class. So I'd imagine that I was just playing for Lenny, at home in the living room, and I'd relax. Plus, musicians that good who are also great people, they inspire to you rise to the occasion. The session wound up being a blast, and the recording turned out better than I'd ever imagined."

The pianist-composer had these comments on some of the tracks from *Songs My Daughter Knows*:

"Rainbow Connection" – This is the first song I ever played for Lenny and it's my all-time favorite pop song. I was waiting for some crazy miracle, like she would be humming along at four days old. No such epiphany, but it's become one of her favorites too.

"Flight of the Foo Birds" – I put together video clips of Lenny to post on You Tube for her grandparents to see. And I ended up using this song from *Atomic Basie* as the soundtrack. It was exactly what I needed for this video montage of this happy little baby. And as she got older, the videos would upset her in a way that was only matched by her old *Baby Einstein* video, which she'd also stopped liking. Maybe she associated that tune with some bad memory, we'll never know for sure. But she'd get all tense and start to cry whenever she'd hear that tune, with or without the video. But then one day I was playing it on piano, when she could talk, and she said, "That's my song!" So she got over it. It was really important to me to include that one on the record, so I was relieved when it became a happy tune for her again.

"Autumn Leaves" – It was part of our story. I wanted to have a standard from the Oscar Peterson collection, *The London House Sessions*, because we listened to it endlessly for the two days in the recovery room. Tracey is friends with Oscar's youngest daughter, and they were both excited that Lenny might arrive on Oscar's birthday. But because it was a difficult delivery, it got delayed and she was born the next morning. So there's various reasons to have "Autumn Leaves" on there. It was the first music she ever heard. And the idea of doing it in that cakewalk style came from Allen Toussaint's *Bright Mississippi*, which is another album Lenny heard a lot in the car. He does that title track, a Thelonious Monk tune, in that amazing cakewalk style. A lot of drummers up here in Toronto don't know that style, but of course when I asked Jason about it, he had a bunch of variations of it, right at his fingertips. The guy's a walking encyclopedia of jazz. And the guys just knocked it out of the park. When Jason and Bill play it together it's like Jason's playing it almost straight and Bill is adding the shuffle feel on tambourine. It's something that when I moved to Toronto with only classical training, before I got into jazz, would've just sounded wrong to me. "You can't play it in two different grooves. That's crazy!" And now I hear it and it just makes me happy. It's just inexplicably cool.

"Inside Straight" – Lenny knows the Dirty Dozen Brass Band version (from 1990s *The New Orleans Album*) but I focused on the Cannonball Adderley version because the instrumentation was closer to my group than the brass band version. I changed the arrangement a bit, so the soloing's over the form and not just a one-bar vamp. And I was very happy that Marlon Jordan showed up for the session; I've played this tune live with just my trio but that tune just screams for horn up front. And in a strange coincidence, the closing track on that same Dirty Dozen album that Lenny used to hear in the car was written by Kidd Jordan, Marlon's dad.

"Tea for Two" -- This is the song that I would instinctively hum to Lenny when she would cry to calm her, and it would work. I asked my mother, "By any chance was that what you sang to me when I was a kid and I remembered it subconsciously?" And she said, "No, I don't really know the tune that well." So I don't know why that's the one that popped into my head when I needed to soothe Len, but it worked. We play it as a jazz waltz then switch to a 4/4 swing.

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