

## Neil Tatar's *After the Rain*

As reviewed by Bill Binkelman, Wind & Wire

Not many artists release three albums in quick succession and hit all of them out of the park the way pianist/guitarist Neil Tatar has done. I mean, where's the learning curve? (Well, yes, he has been making music his career for many years before this, I know). Even with his long tenure performing and composing prior to this new phase of crafting New Age music, the critical acclaim afforded his first two releases is extraordinary. *After The Rain* will almost certainly continue the praise from critics and listeners alike.

As Will Ackerman (who co-produced the album with Tom Eaton and Tatar) states in the liner notes "There aren't many musicians who are as capable of composing and performing on guitar and piano with equal skill." I couldn't agree more except to emphasize something else. Tatar's talents are not just equal on both instruments, but those talents are upper register talents. Neil Tatar's artistry puts him with the best in the genre for both guitar and piano.

*After The Rain* is not a severe departure from Tatar's last release, *Learning To Fly*, but it is markedly more subdued and low-key, which is obviously the artist's aim since the album's subtitle is *Peaceful, Reflective Instrumental Music*. Where *Learning To Fly* emphasized a jazz-influenced approach and featured a pleasant dose of energy and cheerfulness, *After The Rain* aims (and hits) a slower, gentler tempo and a more introspective mood. However, Tatar hasn't abandoned his jazz history completely, as can be heard on the subtly saucy "Sunsets" with a special nod to Premik Russell Tubbs' soprano sax playing as well as Jeff Haynes snazzy percussion accompaniment. Likewise, the album closing "Sidewalk Jam" injects just the right amount of jazz influences to end the CD on an upbeat mood and a moderately uptempo pace.

Most of *After The Rain*, though, follows the path put forth on the first track, "Gentle Steps," a romantic duet between Tatar and violinist Charlie Bisharat. The piece features a relaxed flow to it and opens the recording in fine fashion. The third song, "Reflections," casts a more somber shadow, not truly melancholic but perhaps the kind of mood an autumn rainstorm might inspire as one sits by the window watching drops fall slowly down the outside pane. Jeff Oster's flugelhorn performance is his typical mastery of nuance and tone, coloring the music with an amber glow. "When I Was Young," which features a large cast of guest stars (Tubbs, Bisharat, Haynes, as well as Tony Levin on bass, Noah Wilding on vocals, and Ackerman on guitar), hits the same note of remembrance and reflection as did "Gentle Steps," although later in the track, the music veers gracefully into a blend of swing (think Django Reinhardt) and jazz but the slower tempo keeps the track anchored in the overall mood of the majority of this significantly more New Age offering.

Tatar's *modus operandi*, so to speak, is to alternate between piano and guitar every other track, e.g. piano on track 1 and guitar on track 2. He sticks with this until track 7, "Freedom" which begins a streak of three straight piano tunes, before ending with the aforementioned "Sidewalk Jam," on which he plays guitar. What this technique does, to my mind, is emphasize Tatar's mastery of both instruments, or that's how I look at it.

The rest of the tracks on the album are all equally fantastic (I can't recall having anything but praise for any of Tatar's songs, to be honest). "Nightwalk" strikes an interesting blend of mystery and melodicism, as if the titular reference was a stroll down deserted streets, or perhaps through a haunted forest! "Freedom," a duet with Jill Haley (English horn) belies its title (which had me expecting something celebratory) and is instead somewhat sorrowful, but in an incredibly beautiful fashion. "Welcome Home," glows with the warmth of a gently burning hearth. It's another "large ensemble" track and everyone contributes to the rich emotional feel of the music, evoking the pleasant mood of coming back from a journey and seeing family and friends at your doorstep.

One more thing worthy of mention about *After The Rain* is that it is one of the rare albums produced and recorded at Imaginary Road Studios that features nary even one solo track by the artist. No less than five tracks feature five guest artists and some feature six. This statement is less a measure of quality or artistic value and instead may point to how much the artist enjoys working with the I.R. "usual suspects." Take my observation for what it's worth, i.e. just my observation.

*After The Rain* should firmly entrench Neil Tatar at the top of the New Age contemporary instrumental pyramid. After all, going 3 for 3 in baseball is good but not remarkable. Doing it in releases, that's a whole other ballgame. Well done, kind sir—well done, indeed!