

THE RIPPINGTONS



Over the past two decades, Russ Freeman & The Rippingtons have taken the stage thousands of times throughout the world with just one goal in mind: celebrating the joy of life and music with their ever adoring fans. Marking an incredible milestone in the history of smooth jazz, the band turns 20 years old this year, and invites fans all around the world to celebrate with *The Rippingtons 20th Anniversary*, a remarkable new CD/DVD package that includes a CD of all new Ripps music and a DVD featuring a colorful retrospective as well as exciting videos from over the years.

Most bandleaders would satisfy themselves at such a juncture with a complacent look back and a greatest hits package, but Russ Freeman, true to his ever creative and innovative spirit as a composer and producer, had a more exciting idea: an all-star class reunion of sorts, gathering all Rippingtons recording and touring members past and present to alternate on ten brand new compositions and a sizzling medley featuring newly recorded snippets of nine classic Ripps cuts.

Complementing his own trademark mix of fiery electric and romantic classical guitars, Freeman's guest list is truly a smooth jazz fan's dream—saxophonists Jeff Kashiwa, Paul Taylor, Kirk Whalum, Dave Koz and Eric Marienthal; keyboardist Bill Heller; bassist Kim Stone; vocalists Patti Austin and Jeffrey Osborne; drummer Dave Karasony; and special guest Brian McKnight, who wrote, produced and sings lead vocals on the lush romance "Anything." As if that group wasn't enough to get Bill Mayer's famed jazz cat (which graces every Ripps album cover) dancing, *The Rippingtons 20th Anniversary* also reunites most of the lineup of

L.A. musicians who performed on The Rippingtons' groundbreaking 1986 debut album, *Moonlighting*, which Jazziz Magazine once called the most influential contemporary jazz album of all time: saxophonists Brandon Fields and Dave Koz (who played the EWI on the original recording); pianists David Benoit and Gregg Karukas; bassist Jimmy Johnson; drummer Tony Morales and percussionist Steve Reid. The collection is dedicated with love to the late great singer Carl Anderson, who first tantalized Ripps fans with his brilliant vocalizing on 1989's *Tourist in Paradise*.

In his heartfelt liner notes for the project, Freeman writes that the breakup of the Beatles when he was nine had a direct impact years later on his role as the leader of the Rippingtons: "I vowed that if I ever started a band, it would never break up. In a way, that became the model for my vision of the Rippingtons. I felt that if a band could survive personnel changes, and evolve its sound naturally over time, it would have a better chance of survival. What I did not realize at the time was how prescient the idea was, and how it would withstand the test of time."

When The Ripps' 20th anniversary rolled around, Freeman explains, "the challenge was to decide how many older songs to revisit versus how much new material to include. It occurred to me that the most compelling idea would be to bring back all the perform-

ers from over the years to play new material, to show that we're still vibrant and creative and excited about the future. The medley of classic songs works because it's like a gentle wink back at where we've been, rather than full reworkings that might be compared to the originals.

"What a blast this all was, getting the guys back together," he adds. "Tony (Morales) hasn't played at all in ten years, but he was excited to be part of it. Jeff (Kashiwa) has worked a few Ripps dates recently, and the chemistry we had during his ten years with the band came right back. The sessions were fun and effortless, and everyone fell easily into the way they're known for playing both with us and on their own. I was reminded of why I wanted to work with all these musicians in the first place. But even beyond that, the greatest thing was just hanging out again, and I was happy to see that the rapport everyone had over the years hadn't diminished at all. I've always felt the key to The Ripps' success was the songs, and all I had to do was bring on the best players to help me realize my vision for them."

While he loves the process of creating and recording music in the studio, Freeman has always said that the best part of the phenomenon of The Rippingtons is getting out on the road and meeting the fans; the DVD

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Retrospective included in the package of *The Rippingtons 20th Anniversary* is something of a gift for them, a valentine to express his and the band's appreciation. Freeman dedicates the soulful, tropical flavored track "Costa Del Sol" (which features vocal contributions from Austin and Osborne) to Jack Sherman, a long-time devoted fan who represents the spirit of the fascinating connection between the band and its followers.

"It's always hard for me to explain the symbiotic relationship we have with our fans, but I think Jack's story is one that has always inspired me," says Freeman. "He was nine or ten when we met him, and we developed a friendship with him as he fought cancer for many years. I sent him a copy of the new album when it was finished, and he died listening to it at the age of 17. He was buried in his T-shirt that had the cover of our album, *Black Diamond*, on it. He really impacted my life. He always said he was our biggest fan, but in truth, I was his biggest fan."

The party on *The Rippingtons 20th Anniversary* begins with an energetic homage to the "City of Angels," whose heavy thumping groove is topped by the sizzling call and response of Freeman's electric guitar and Fields' expressive sax. Then the "Celebration" begins, with the dual sax energy of Whalum and Taylor rising over the swinging rhythms and rising spirit of the Jerry Hey horn section (a familiar sound on many previous Ripps' albums). After a trip to "Costa Del Sol," the horns sizzle again as Freeman, Fields and Karukas play a lively, urban flavored game of "Bingo Jingo." Freeman's gentle, classical guitar playing is featured on the graceful ballad "Eternity," which is followed by Reid's wild, dense soundscaping and percussion at the start of the swaying, Pat Methenyesque "Six Four."

Karukas, Fields and the horns usher in the bright funk-blues of "Rainbow" before Freeman and Marienthal join forces on "Twenty," a track that eases from a gentle ballad vibe to rockin' electric jam session. After the sensuous Brian McKnight track "Anything," Dave Koz's soprano carries the dreamy melody of the seductive "A Kiss Under The Moonlight." Then comes the "20th Anniversary Tribute," a multi-faceted six minute medley that will warm the hearts of longtime Ripps fans with refashioned segments of classic tunes featuring contributions by Morales, Karasony, Stone, Heller, Kashiwa, Whalum, Fields, Osborne and the horn section.

Perhaps the most amazing part of The Rippingtons' story is that after the unexpected success of *Moonlighting*, Russ Freeman—who had released a successful solo album, *Nocturnal Playground*, in 1985—was still on the fence regarding whether to pursue a career as a solo artist or become the full-time leader of a band. "I knew I couldn't have both," he says, "and I weighed the ups and downs of both potential choices. But I think

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Featuring
Russ Freeman
(clockwise from bottom left)
Kim Stone, Bill Heller,
Dave Karasony, Scott Breadman,
Eric Marienthal, Jeff Kashiwa,
Steve Reid



my heart was telling me all along to do the band. There were so many more facets I could explore in a band situation than I could on my own."

With *Moonlighting* paving the way, The Rippingtons dominated the smooth jazz landscape from the late 80s on with their hit recordings *Kilimanjaro*, *Tourist in Paradise*, *Welcome to the St. James Club*, *Curves Ahead*, *Weekend In Monaco*, *Live in L.A.*, *Sahara*, *Brave New World*, *Black Diamond*, *Topaz*, *Live Across America*, *Life in the Tropics*, *Let It Ripp!* and *Wild Card*, their 2005 disc that featured Cuban superstar vocalists Willy Chirino and Albita. Freeman also recorded the solo album *Drive* in 2002, and collaborated with Craig Chaquico on *From the Redwoods to the Rockies* in 1998.

In 1994, Freeman and longtime manager Andi Howard launched the independent label Peak Records. *Life in the Tropics* was the company's first joint venture with Concord Records, and the label's roster over the years has included legendary artists like David Benoit and Lee Ritenour; smooth jazz artists Gerald Albright, Paul Taylor and Eric Marienthal; vocalists Regina Belle, former Ambrosia frontman David Pack, 2004 American Idol finalist Latoya London and recently signed Chante Moore, among others.

Looking forward to the next twenty years, Freeman says, "When I started The Ripps, my focus was on producing and writing and just getting the music out there, but over the course of time, I started to achieve everything I originally set out to do as a guitarist as well. I have always loved playing the electric, but in the last few years, have fallen in love again with the classical guitar, and feel I've come a long way as a player. Leading the Ripps has allowed me to be challenged by some of the world's greatest musicians, and that has contributed enormously to my development. Trends have come and go in smooth jazz, but our music is about transcending what's hot now for music that will endure. If you put it out straight from the heart and keep taking chances, it will stand the test of time."

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