

## **GREG SKAFF**

*“Greg is the most versatile and imaginative guitarist I’ve ever worked with.”* --Bobby Watson

**Greg Skaff** plumbs the depths of creative artistry and honest emotion in his guitar playing, showing himself to be among the strongest proponents of jazz music anywhere. No exaggeration. The native Kansan, whose first professional job was a five-year stay in the band of saxophone giant Stanley Turrentine, has flourished on the New York City jazz scene since the 1980s.

He has played gigs and/or recorded with past masters Ruth Brown, Freddie Hubbard, and David “Fathead” Newman as well as notables Ben Allison, Bruce Barth, Pat Bianchi, George Colligan, Orin Evans, Joe Farnsworth, David Hazeltine, Mike LeDonne, Victor Lewis, Gloria Lynne, Ralph Peterson, Jr., Jim Rotondi, E. J. Strickland, Bobby Watson and, among others, Matt Wilson.

At the helm of his acclaimed trio, Greg has commanded the attention of discriminating listeners in club and festival performances throughout the country. A few of the superior clubs he has played include the Bar Next Door, the 55 Bar, and the Iridium in Manhattan and the Artists’ Quarter in St. Paul. Overseas, the trio triumphed at the Umbria Jazz Festival in Italy.

Greg’s four feature albums have been well-received by jazz fans everywhere. The latest is ***116th & Park***, his fourth overall and third consecutive release on the high-profile ZOHO Music label. (The title refers to his home neighborhood in East Harlem.) Greg’s current working trio with B-3 specialist Pat Bianchi and drummer Ralph Peterson, Jr. is featured, and also sharing their considerable

musical intelligence and empathy, on a track each, are guest string bassist Paul Nowinski and percussionist Mauro Refosco.

Greg composed five songs and Ralph contributed one, “The Jugular,” plus there are fresh arrangements of Harold Mabern’s “Beehive,” Thelonious Monk’s “Bye-Ya,” and the Ellington-Strayhorn classic “Come Sunday.” Greg, using a nylon string guitar for the first time in the studio, points out that “both the original compositions and the covers of others’ compositions [have] structures and time signatures [that] are a bit more involved than on my previous CDs.”

“Generally speaking,” he continues, “I think this recording is a bit of a departure for an organ trio as far as flavors of the songs. The original compositions draw from broader influences than on my previous recordings. ‘Lapis’ is an original composition inspired by some Afghan music I heard played on an instrument called the Rubab, and ‘Serenade To a Surdo’ was inspired by Brazilian music. ‘Tropicalia’ is also a Brazilian-influenced composition; however, it is played here not in the organ trio format but with guitar, acoustic bass, and percussion. It was previously recorded by an organ trio on my last CD, *East Harlem Skyline*.”

The artistic success of *116<sup>th</sup> & Park* attests to his growth in both compositional and improvisational skills but also his faith in the organ-trio format as a contemporary means of expression. From the album’s start to its finish about fifty minutes later, Greg makes a mighty impression with his steeped-in-the-blues individuality, his wealth of creative ideas, his radiant tone, and his unassailable integrity.

Critics have been quick to praise the trio for bringing the swinging, challenging music of the new album to ardent life in New Jersey and NYC studios. John Heidt at *Vintage Guitar* concluded his rave review: “Skaff is one of the best of his class.” In another strongly

favorable critique of *116<sup>th</sup> & Park*, Jeff Potter of *Modern Drummer* noted, “This trio keeps the ideas rolling.” At *Jazz Times*, Scott Albin was just as generous in his approval: “This trio’s versatility, musicianship and great rapport make this CD another standout [in Greg’s discography].” Blogcritics echoed, “Together [Skaff, Bianchi, and Peterson] are a talented creative force.” Moreover, the best satellite and terrestrial jazz radio stations have added albums tracks to play lists, eliciting positive reactions from their listeners.

Back home in Wichita, Greg picked up the guitar at age 16 after becoming enthralled by George Benson’s soul-jazz album *It’s Uptown*. He went on to study music at Wichita State for three semesters, but his real passion was performing jazz, blues, and rock in local clubs. Attentive to Lonnie Smith, Jack McDuff, and other top soul-jazzmen passing through the Sunflower State, Greg realized that his dream of becoming a top-level jazz guitarist would best be served by relocating to the jazz world’s capital city, NYC.

Not long after moving to the Big Apple, Greg found work in the band of Stanley Turrentine. As a worthy successor to George Benson, Kenny Burrell, and Grant Green in Mr. T’s band, he refined his skills and deepened his understanding of jazz over the course of hundreds of performances in North and South America and in Europe, Japan, and South Africa. Greg looks back on the experience and says, “I didn’t realize how much I was absorbing at the time. I gravitate toward Stanley’s kind of phrasing, where he puts the notes in a beat, in the meter. His sound is ingrained in my brain.”

Greg has enjoyed a longtime jazz affiliation with renowned saxophonist Bobby Watson. “It’s a lot looser than with Stanley,” he commented, comparing now-deceased Turrentine’s *modus operandi* to Watson’s. “I’ve had to listen to the music in a different way. I play differently in the ensemble; it’s much more open and I

make up more guitar parts.” British critics Richard Cook and Richard Morton, in their encyclopedic *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD*, noted that Greg’s playing on the Watson album *Quiet As It’s Kept* was both “revelatory” and “elegantly done.”

For certain, Greg brings virtuosic spirit to his guitar lines when collaborating with stellar organ players and drummers in the recording studio. *Ellington Boulevard*, first out in 2004 and re-released last year, had him in the company of Mike LeDonne (organ) and Joe Farnsworth (drums), while *East Harlem Skyline*, which originally appeared in 2009 and also returned in 2012, found George Colligan behind the console and E. J. Strickland on drums. Both releases earned equally strong notices. *Jazz Times* reviewer Owen Cordle called *Ellington Boulevard* a “nice set by mature, thinking players,” and Zan Stewart, at the *New Jersey Star-Ledger*, described *East Harlem Skyline* as “a vibrant view of the modern-day jazz guitar-organ-drums trio.” Critic Bill Milkowski was drawn to Greg’s playing for its “rhythmic assuredness and his boppish tendency of blowing at breakneck tempos with apparent ease.”

Rendered with compassion and intelligence, *116<sup>th</sup> & Park* continues Greg’s hot streak as a superlative jazz recording artist. It’s still another thrilling, powerful artistic work that says something enduring about the organ-guitar-drums format.

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