

From the soulful to the swinging, Greg Skaff has earned a reputation as one of the premiere guitarists in modern jazz. A native of Kansas, the New York-based Skaff got his start with a five-year tenure in sax titan Stanley Turrentine's band and has gone on to work with many of the music's most legendary names. His diverse resumé ranges from such past masters as Ruth Brown, Freddie Hubbard, David "Fathead" Newman and Gloria Lynne to current notables including Bobby Watson, Ben Allison, Bruce Barth, Pat Bianchi, Orrin Evans, Joe Farnsworth, David Hazeltine, Mike LeDonne, Victor Lewis, Ralph Peterson Jr., Jim Rotondi, and E. J. Strickland.

On his latest album, *Polaris* (SMK Jazz), Skaff can be found fronting a trio comprising a pair of jazz icons: bassist Ron Carter and drummer Albert "Tootie" Heath. Significant as the first album in his career with a standard guitar, bass and drums line-up, *Polaris* quickly establishes itself as an exemplar of the form, featuring three jazz masters delighting in each other's creativity and ebullient sense of swing. C. Andrew Hovan at *All About Jazz* called the album "genuinely sublime music that is sure to be remembered as one of 2021's most memorable releases."

Skaff's dive into the deep end of straightahead jazz, in tandem with two of the greatest ever to play the music, is reflective not only of his skill and confidence but of the wide-ranging eclecticism of his musical imagination. It was the unexpected follow-up to *Soulmation* (Zoho), a rock-fueled acceleration of the groove-centric sound he'd long established through his extensive stints in the organ jazz realm, including his own trios with hard-grooving greats like Mike LeDonne and Pat Bianchi.

"Skaff is all about the grease, grit, and grooves on *Soulmation*." Wrote Dan Bilawksy in *All About Jazz*, who called the album "a logical extension of his previous work... but it's a tad heavier, raunchier, and funkier than anything Skaff threw us [before]."

While *Soulmation* may have seemed like a departure, it actually harkened back to his early days in Wichita, Kansas. Like so many guitarists he got his start in rock and blues garage bands, playing covers of British Invasion hits and B.B. King favorites. His destiny was forever changed in one day, however, when a friend loaned him two seminal records: Jimi Hendrix's *Are You Experienced* and George Benson's *It's Uptown*. New possibilities for the instrument suddenly opened up for Skaff, and set him on a path of discovery that continues to this day.

At the time, however, it led him to begin studying jazz at Wichita State University. At least as educational – likely more – were his extracurricular activities. This was in the waning days of the famed Chitlin' Circuit, an informal network of clubs winding through the southern states where African-American performers could play. The Circuit passed through Skaff's hometown, and offered him invaluable opportunities to perform with organ masters like Dr. Lonnie Smith and Jimmy McGriff, laying the foundation for his own later mastery of the form.

Encouraged by this bandstand experience, Skaff left Wichita State after three semesters to test his mettle in the jazz mecca of New York City. The gambit paid off not long after

when he won the audition to succeed George Benson, Kenny Burrell and Grant Green in Turrentine's stellar band. He also forged a long-lasting relationship with saxophonist Bobby Watson, which led the guitarist down more exploratory paths. The diverse approaches of those two singular mentors would converge in combustible fashion throughout Skaff's ever-evolving career.

Alongside a thriving sideman career, Skaff made his debut as a leader with 1996's bop-leaning *Blues and Other News*, featuring pianist Bruce Barth, bassist Tony Scherr and drummer Gregory Hutchinson. He debuted his now-renowned organ trio on the funky 2004 follow-up, *Ellington Boulevard*, with LeDonne and drummer Joe Farnsworth.

He took that tradition out for a more modern spin in 2008 with *East Harlem Skyline*, this time with George Colligan on organ and E.J. Strickland on drums, with material that ranged from hard-driving originals to an eclectic choice of covers by Wayne Shorter and Fiona Apple. He continued to expand the format with *116th & Park*, joined by the powerhouse tandem of organist Pat Bianchi and drummer Ralph Peterson Jr.

The reinvention of *Soulmation* followed, leading into the deft turn towards the deeply-felt straightahead with *Polaris*. The guitarist's tenure in Ron Carter's big band resulted in the iconic bassist's involvement in the project, which then lured Tootie Heath into the fold. The pair had only played together once before, on the 1993 all-star session *The Riverside Reunion Band*, making the occasion all the more special. Since the recording Skaff has continued in the same vein with his new trio, featuring bassist Ugonna Okegwo and drummer Jonathan Barber.

In whatever form his music takes, Skaff has illuminated revered stages across the country and around the globe, from notable NYC venues like the Blue Note, Birdland, Smalls, Mezzrow, Iridium, Zinc Bar, and Minton's Playhouse to the Umbria Jazz Festival in Italy. With virtuosic skills and a deep well of soul from which to draw, Greg Skaff will no doubt continue to follow his inspiration in diverse and scintillating new directions. All in a day's work for a guitarist who *JazzTimes* called "one of those musician's musicians who can effortlessly do whatever the situation calls for without breaking a sweat."