



JONATHAN STIERS

The Player & The Pawn

BY DON LOWE
PHOTOS BY SUSAN BEEZLEY

BUDDING LOCAL ARTIST JONATHAN STIERS MIGHT NOT NECESSARILY CONSIDER HIMSELF A MASTER MUSICIAN. BUT, THEN AGAIN... THE RECENTLY COMPLETED CD TITLED THE PLAYER & THE PAWN MOST DEFINITELY REFLECTS THE TREMENDOUS VERSATILITY OF THIS MULTI-FACETED INDIVIDUAL, WHO PARLAYED A WONDERFUL WAY WITH WORDS INTO A COMPLETE SET OF LYRICS THAT HE COMBINED IMPRESSIVELY WHILE SHOWCASING HIS TERRIFIC TALENTS AS A PIANIST AS WELL.

PONDERING THE COMPLETED PROJECT

It's actually been about six months since Stiers' most recent work was initially released, which has given the resident of Fayetteville a little bit of time to ponder how it turned out. "I'm very pleased with the final product," he said. "But, naturally as an artist, I don't know that I'll ever be completely satisfied. When I listen to the CD, there are places here and there that I think, 'Oh, I wish I could re-do that.' But, if I were to work like that, I'd never have a CD to put out. I also feel very proud that I've come a long way as a songwriter, especially comparing it to my last effort.



"I'M TAKING A BREAK NOW AND TRYING TO PLAY LIVE WHEN I CAN. SADLY, WITH A FULL-TIME CORPORATE JOB (AS A GRAPHIC DESIGNER FOR THE WAL-MART MARKETING CREATIVE DEPARTMENT), THERE SOMETIMES ISN'T ENOUGH TIME IN THE DAY TO PURSUE MY NUMBER ONE PASSION. I CERTAINLY WILL CONTINUE TO WRITE AND DEFINITELY SEE ANOTHER CD ON THE HORIZON."

FOLLOWING IN HIS FAMILY'S FOOTSTEPS

It's not surprising that Stiers has so much more than just a passing interest in music, considering the tremendous influence his immediate family had on him at a very early age. "My dad has been a club musician all of his life," Stiers said. "I guess my first memory is sitting down at his old Wurlitzer keyboard and playing around on that. I think I was about seven years old. I'd bang around on it, not knowing what I was doing. I remember picking out "Close to You" by The Carpenters. From then on, I'd sit with a radio and try to pick stuff out by ear. Now, I've got friends who make special requests for songs they'd like me to cover."

"My family is very musical," Stiers understated. "Growing up I did the talent show circuit with my cousin, Tracee. We'd sing at the Washington County Fair and various charity events to get exposure. I sang "Something's Coming" from West Side Story and won second place when I was 15."

COUNTRY MUSIC LEGEND PROVIDES INSPIRATION

"My mother always encouraged me to sing. I remember going to see Coal Miner's Daughter with her and we'd sing along to the soundtrack over and over again. I'm not a big country music

fan, but that helped me really start to appreciate all types of music. And, there was a big portion of the movie that featured the great Patsy Cline, so that's kind of when I discovered that I loved her music. She had such a way of singing songs where you could feel all her emotion. I think it's also something that I discovered that I love about music – how you can hear a song and remember where you were when you first heard it, and what you were doing. It can transport you to another time and place."

While the piano has now become more of a focal point for Stiers at this particular time and place in his life, he actually spent several years mastering another instrument. "I played the alto sax all through junior high and high school," Stiers noted. "But, I haven't touched it since,"

NOT JUST THE PIANO MAN

"I did OK," Stiers continued rather modestly of his capabilities to play the alto sax. "I was first chair in my high school band, but never really had a passion for the instrument. I remember my Dad suggesting it because it was the "cool instrument" to play. Especially at that time, it was so marketable in the industry with people like David Sanborn, Kenny G and Candy Dulfer getting songs on the radio. Huey Lewis, Glen Frey ... bands like that really used a lot of sax in their songs in the 80s."

Popular or not, Stiers still had other ideas. "I've always come back to the piano," he said. "I feel like it's an extension of me. I always liked the piano, but never really thought it would become the huge presence in my life that it has. After graduating high school, I didn't really touch the piano much until 1993. I saw, a then unknown, Tori Amos, on MTV. I bought her CD and became fascinated with the piano all over again. I love how expressive and diverse you can be with one instrument."

READING A DIFFERENT WAY

Although he's obviously done quite well when it comes to playing an instrument, there's actually another aspect of music that hasn't come so naturally for Stiers. "I think I've always had a good feel for music," he said. "But, I struggled with the technical side. By that I mean, reading music mostly. I learned to read treble clef when playing the saxophone. I never learned bass clef (the left hand for piano).

"I never took piano lessons since I was always learning things by ear or making things up. I remember when my grandmother suggested I take lessons when I was 15, I went to one lesson and the teacher was horrified by my fingering and felt I'd played to long on my own to go back and start over."

THE THIRD TIME IS THE CHARM

Whatever approach Stiers ultimately took as he learned to read, write and play music, it's all obviously worked out quite well. Then again, it didn't all come together without a few sour notes along the way before his newest CD was unveiled. "This CD is actually my third following two forgettable cassette releases," Stiers admitted. "It wasn't until falling in love with Tori Amos and beginning to appreciate other singer/song writers that I thought of pairing my voice with the piano. In 1994, I bought my own upright Yamaha. My first couple of efforts were merely experimental, trying to find my voice and sound. My first CD in 1999 was a major step towards who I feel I am, musically. But, still, half the tracks were throwaways... fillers."

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“Then, I took about a four-year break. I’d sit and play late at night or whenever the mood struck, singing, recording random bits and pieces to my multi-track recorder. After awhile, I started to realize I had enough material to start putting the puzzle together. I finished the track, “Waiting” and it was then that I realized I was starting a new album. I had a handful of songs that I thought I’d finish and they would be the new CD. However, once I finished “Waiting,” I felt completely inspired to begin writing all new songs. Once I started it flowed consistently and I ended up finishing an album late last year.”

THE CREATIVE...

Creating the meaningful, impactful and thought-provoking words in his songs was definitely an integral piece of this work for Stiers. “I write all of my own lyrics,” he said. “The music always comes first. Sometimes I jot down words, ideas and phrases. Then, I start to piece them together as I work on a melody. The overall theme of it started to take shape. Drawing from my own life experiences, love and loss. I became fascinated with the games people play and how easy it is to get sucked in to it.”

As for *The Player & The Pawn*, Stiers’ says “I wrote the songs over the past three years, but the majority of it in the last half of 2005. I wrote about 20 songs total, but only 10 ended up on the CD. Sometimes a melody wouldn’t come to me, or lyrics or they just weren’t fitting the theme I was going for. A couple of songs were completed musically, but were without lyrics.

“The very last track, ‘When it’s Over’ literally sat until the last minute without lyrics. It was the last song to be finished, because I couldn’t decide where to go with it. One night while hanging out with a friend of mine at a club, I watched people and all the mind games that everyone was playing. I wondered, what would they all do, including myself, when it’s all over. What happens when there’s no one else to play and you’re old, gray and alone?”

THE TECHNICAL...

The mechanics of it all may have been the most meticulous part of this undertaking. “From a recording standpoint, I’d record the vocals and piano with a basic drum track,” Stiers’ explained. “I’d then give a disk over to my friend Alex. He takes them, puts all the tracks in to the computer, using a program called “LogicPro.” He comes back and beefs up the drums and the overall sound. I was practically living at his house the last three months of ’05.

“We painstakingly went through each song, tweaking, re-recording vocals, mixing until I finally had to say, ‘Okay, we have to stop and move on.’ I didn’t want to fall victim to an over-produced album. I wanted it to be as natural of a process as possible without over-thinking it or being such a perfectionist that it never got finished. Once I got the CD printed, I joined forces with CDBaby.com. They’re a great resource for the independent musician. With their help, I’ve gotten my music on iTunes, which is a huge accomplishment and something I’m really excited about.”

THE REWARD

The greatest excitement in all of it for Stiers is having all those who sample his music be touched by it. “Trying not to sound cliché, but I love when people are moved by my songs,” he said. “I love the energy of playing live and seeing that people are enjoying it. Most of all, I love how music makes me feel and I love that I can be a small part of that.” •••