PAGE 1 | JIM SNIDERO STRINGS

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JIM SNIDERO – alto saxophone, flute RENEE ROSNES – piano PAUL GILL – bass BILLY DRUMMOND – drums LAURA SEATON (concertmaster), MARK FELDMAN (solo #4), JOYCE HAMMAN, CENOVIA CUMMINGS, PAUL WOODIEL, SUE LORENTSEN – violins RALPH FARRIS, KENJI BUNCH – violas TOMAS ULRICH (solo #2), MARY WOOTEN (written solos #3, 6) – cellos DAVID FINK – string bass

On "Ventura" the violin-cello duet is by Ralph Farris and Mary Wooten. Assistance with scores Mark Lopeman

1. SLIPPING AWAY 4:57

2. River Suite, Pt. 1: DAWN 7:06

3. River Suite, Pt. 2: ON THE BANK 7:39

4. River Suite, Pt. 3: TORRENT 5:10

5. THEME FOR ERNIE (Fred Lacey) (Prestige Music) BMI 7:15

6. FOREVER GONE 9:33

7. VENTURA 6:58

8. IT'S THE TALK OF THE TOWN (Jerry Livingston / Marty Symes / Al J. Neiburg) (Hallmark Music / Music Sales Corp.) ASCAP 7:10

All selections composed by Jim Snidero (ARO Music, BMI), except as indicated.

PRODUCED BY JIM SNIDERO AND BOB BELDEN / ARRANGED BY JIM SNIDERO / CONDUCTED BY WALT WEISKOPF RECORDED BY A.T. MICHAEL MACDONALD AT / SYSTEMS TWO, BROOKLYN, NY: OCT. 25 & NOV. 13, 2001 / NEWLY REMASTERED BY DAVE DARLINGTON, BASS HIT RECORDING, NEW YORK, NY, 2021 / GRAPHIC DESIGN: CHRISTOPHER DRUKKER / PREVIOUSLY RELEASED ON MILESTONE RECORDS

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As a single listen should make clear, *Strings* is a triumph. The playing and writing of Jim Snidero are so compelling both emotionally and technically that they require no backstory to drive the point home. Yet given the circumstances of this ambitious project, the end results become even more of a marvel. This was a challenging assignment from a variety of perspectives, and Snidero has met the challenges in a manner that should earn him a place among the jazz world's leading artists.

For the past two decades, since Snidero moved to New York in 1981, his saxes and flute have been heard in the Toshiko Akioshi Orchestra, the Mingus Big Band, in small groups alongside the likes of Jack McDuff, Eddie Palmieri, and Tom Harrell, and on a series of increasingly impressive recordings under his own name for various independent jazz labels. As his instrumental command grew, so did Snidero's ambitions as a writer. After a sextet album of Joe Henderson's music where Snidero focused on arranging for the first time, he was ready to place his alto sax in an orchestral context where such personal idols as Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderley, and Sonny Stitt had tested their own musicianship and lyricism. Yet Snidero, who had never written for strings previously, quickly saw the opportunity to display much more than his skills as a soloist.

"When the idea first came up, I thought I'd handle it like others have, choosing familiar tunes and getting an experienced arranger to do the writing," he admits. "Then I thought, 'Why not do it all myself, so it will be all my statement?' I realized this was something I might not get the chance to do again – to create an ensemble with an interactive sound, a jazz sound, where the strings were inside the music and not just playing lush, beautiful chords in the background."

The first step was honing his concept of how strings could function in a jazz context. "Playing with strings is definitely a dream of many musicians, especially saxophone players," he notes. "but it is an exotic experience because it happens so rarely, and writing for strings is something that I had never studied. So I was basically starting from scratch. I quickly realized that focusing on some of the books that are out there was not the way to go, and that poring over classical scores would present so much for me to learn that I would get lost. I ended up learning to write for strings the way I learned to play, by listening and transcribing. Clare Fischer, Claus Ogerman, and Eddie Sauter were my primary sources. I did look at a book of piano arrangements by Clare, who is really amazing; but most of what I learned I got from listening."

A primary result of Snidero's tutorial was a sense of how to make the music work dramatically and rhythmically. "I've never heard anyone write for strings in a medium-tempo swing context where it doesn't sound pretentious," he explains. "But one thing I learned from listening to Clare is that you can keep the mood up by changing things rhythmically. 'Slipping Away,' for example, is swing in 3/4. Latin rhythms also work well, so I used them in the second section of the suite and on 'Ventura.' I even pushed myself to write 'Dawn' without a rhythm section, and to use pizzicato on 'Torrent.' I was thinking about tempos, feeling and form, without changing the harmonic or melodic concept that I would bring to any musical situation."

Snidero displayed the same care to choosing both the size of the ensemble and the individual members. "I ended up with six violins, two violas, and two cellos, which I consider a minimum for a section sound. I talked to (producer Bob) Belden about this, because sometimes you can get away with less in a studio, but ten strings gave me the right sound, especially with these violinists. The balance was there, which is not always the case. Sometimes, when three first violins and three second violins are present, the balance tends to lean to the seconds. It also became clear that I could use the two cellos not merely as a section, but as separate voices."

Not surprisingly, personnel was crucial. "I did the contracting for the date myself, because I was particularly concerned with getting the right string players." Snidero stresses. "And every one of the players is into doing these kinds of projects. They were completely into it at the rehearsal and worked with me on everything, and their playing is spectacular, especially given that the whole album was done in minimal recording time. And I can say the same thing about the rhythm section. Billy Drummond just sounds incredible, especially on those Latin tunes. He doesn't play super-loud, which helps in a situation like this. Renee Rosnes is so professional, and like Billy was completely prepared when they came to the rehearsal and recording. And Paul Gill is an old friend from Maryland, where I grew up, who I knew was a great arco player who could blend with the other strings."

Daniel Schnyder, the Swiss saxophonist and composer, also offered invaluable advice. "I got together with Daniel a couple of times," Snidero notes, "to discuss notation, and he made it clear that I had to include all of the phrasing and dynamics in my scores. He also emphasized that most of the three-hour rehearsal on the day before the recording was scheduled would be spent with the string players figuring out how to bow the phrases. All of that scared me, but it also prepared me. And,

while I wrote everything at the piano, I also put the music in my computer, which is the greatest rehearsal band in the world when it comes to checking the written parts."

Things fell into place beautifully at the rehearsal on September 10, 2001, the day before the scheduled recording. "I was so inspired, when I finally heard the strings, that I was almost in tears at the rehearsal," Snidero says. "It was like riding on a magic carpet. I didn't have to do a lot, just figure out how to fit in. There were a couple of things that I saw could be improved, but basically I was the happiest guy in the world when I heard the music played at that rehearsal."

Then history intervened. The destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11 obviously made it impossible for the original recording session to take place, and also put the entire project in jeopardy. "I was determined to reschedule, but I knew it would be a different record," says Snidero. "I had no idea when I could get the studio, or whether the same players would be available, or even if I'd still have the right reeds for my horn. For ten days after 9/11, I didn't even take my horn out of the case. As it turned out, some of the string players did change when we made the first session six weeks later, and schedules did not allow for another rehearsal."

Yet the spirit Snidero found in the September rehearsal carried over to the first recording session, which was finally held on October 25, and to the second recording session three weeks later.". The strength of the writing was a major factor from the boldness of the three-part "River Suite," with its shifting moods and canny use of string soloists, to the tenderness of the two ballad standards. Contrasts abound as tempos and textures shift, and the ensemble has moments when it pushes the sax-with-strings envelope. The music is never saccharine and never mere background; the ensemble bends yet always sounds like a unit.

"I think most musicians would agree that the most important thing is to avoid playing things that you yourself find boring," Snidero says of his basic approach. "But I'm also really attracted to warm-sounding music, for lack of a better term. I don't like ugly things, even if they're interesting, and if I go in avant-garde directions I try to balance with warmth. Coltrane is a great example of someone who could play really 'out' and still retain that warmth.

One advantage Snidero possesses is a sound on the alto saxophone (and on the flute, which he employs during "On the Bank") that communicates immediately. "I've really been working on my sound for the past few years, but this is the best it's been," he concurs. Ballad playing is so dependent on tone anyway. But then I didn't want to just make a ballad record. I wanted to play my whole thing, and in some of these pieces you can do anything you want."

The success of *Strings* has encouraged Snidero to keep dreaming. "I'm already thinking about other things I can do in this format, because I feel like I've just scratched the surface. The lack of hip string players has really limited people in the past; but now, with so many string players who understand jazz, the sky's the limit."

Snidero might have added that the string players he praises so highly are at their best when responding to superior writing and improvising, and that his own open-sky attitude and musical gifts are what truly makes *Strings* soar.

- BOB BLUMENTHAL

The release of this Savant reissue marks 20 years since this remarkable ensemble was to record <u>Strings</u> in New York on September 11, 2001, the day of the World Trade Center attacks. Many of us had arrived at the studio as events unfolded, collectively searing that horrific day forever in our hearts.

Recorded a few weeks later, this music is a testament to the resilience of New Yorkers in general, and these incredible musicians in particular. As their performance makes abundantly clear, they are truly the best of the best. In my opinion, <u>Strings</u> has withstood the test of time, and one of my proudest accomplishments as a performer, writer and arranger.

Finally, I'd like to dedicate this recording to my wife, Myoung-Shin. I couldn't have completed this incredible journey without your love, encouragement, and support. — Jim Snidero

www.jimsnidero.com Jim Snidero plays Selmer saxophones and D'Addario reeds

Original design: Todd Allen Design; Cover photo: John Abbott Photos of Renee Rosnes, Billy Drummond and Walt Weiskopf conducting strings by Jim Snidero; Other photos: Takehiko Tokiwa



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