Whitaker’s Swing-Centric Vision

AT A RECORDING SESSION, NOTHING’S MORE BENEFICIAL than good interpersonal vibes. That’s joyfully evident on Rodney Whitaker’s eighth album as a leader, *When We Find Ourselves Alone* (Mack Avenue). Contrary to the album’s title, the bassist surrounded himself with close friends and family, resulting in a hard-swinging session brimming with heart.

Whitaker has dubbed his band Soul-R Energy. Drummer Greg Hutchinson and saxophonist Antonio Hart go way back with the bassist, working together with trumpeter Roy Hargrove in the early ’90s. “We came of age together in that band,” Whitaker said. Pianist Bruce Barth also shares tight bonds, having toured with Whitaker in trumpeter Terence Blanchard’s quintet from 1989–91. The newcomer on the album—making an impressive recording debut—is Whitaker’s daughter Rockelle Fortin, who contributes vocals.

Your new album kicks off with good-time, straightahead swing. As the disc progresses, there are rhythmic explorations within that classic sound. Explain the time signature on “Invitation.”

Your take on Max Roach’s “Freedom Day” is an intense centerpiece of the new album. That song, from 1960, still packs a wallop today, both musically and politically. Several tracks on your album hold political messages.

What sets Detroit apart from other urban music scenes?

A lovely, intimate moment is your duet with your daughter on “Autumn Leaves.” Is that a peek into what goes on in your seven-children household?

The gospel finale, “Lost In You Again,” focuses on the spiritual aspect of the disc. That’s the center. I grew up in an African-American church and that’s always been an important thing in my life. My first two records had Christian themes. It’s a way to say, “Hey, life is not just about playing music and doing shows.” We all struggle with that. We get busy. That’s the point of the song: I look to be lost in God again and keeping that at the center of everything I do—whether it’s family or home or how I deal with people out in the world. That tune was the conclusion of our album; it was like an altar call. It’s about life and love and encouraging everybody to go on.

—Jeff Potter