

Marcin Nowakowski - Better Days (2009)

Written by bluesever

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01. *Wake up!* 02. *I Love Your Smile* 03. *Let's Do It* 04. *HuggyBear* 05. *Sensual* 06. *Feelin' Good* 07. *Waiting For You* 08. *Tonight Is The Night* 09. *After Hours* 10. *Better Days Ahead* Marcin Nowakowski - soprano, alto, tenors & baritone sax, flute

It almost sounds like the start of a playful joke you might hear in a pub: What happens when a good looking, charismatic Polish guy walks into an L.A. recording studio with some of the city's most exciting and accomplished sidemen? If it happens to be Marcin Nowakowski, truly Poland's most acclaimed and famous saxophonists, and instrumental R&B/jazz fusion superstar keyboardist Jeff Lorber is helming the session, the answer is easy. It's pure explosive magic, the picture perfect mix of funky soul grooves and infectious melodies that contemporary urban jazz desperately needs to survive as a viable genre. Riffing on the title of Nowakowski's latest album, if these ten tracks are any indication of what the versatile saxman is capable of, there are indeed Better Days ahead for instrumental music. Lorber, who has worked his production magic in the past for American sax greats like Gerald Albright, Dave Koz, the late Art Porter and Eric Marienthal (one of Nowakowski's former instructors), works his joyful retro keyboard flavors and acoustic piano into the mix while allowing the horn melody and occasional improvisations to take center stage. The bubbly opener "Wake Up!" is an infectious Koz-like alto tune that gets the set off to a rousing start (how could it be otherwise with a title like that?), and who can resist scatting along with the charming, easy grooving cover of Shanice's "I Love Your Smile"? The fun part of Nowakowski's approach is that he's always hanging in the pocket, coming at us with those sizzling, instantly catchy hooks--urging us to fire up and "Let's Do It," chillin' just a little on Lorber's moody "HuggyBear," reminding us via his graceful, soaring soprano that it's all about being "Sensual". Yet the minute he finds an opening, the saxman takes a moment to riff and jam in unexpected ways, as on the hypnotic grooving at the end of "Feelin' Good" and the quick rolling "After Hours," which features some of his most adventurous licks leading into one of Lorber's most playfully aggressive solo piano spots. In essence, it's the perfect instrumental CD, balancing accessibility and free spirited blowing. Props also go to those aforementioned session cats that make every project they work on a party: vocalist Jeff Pescetto (who adds his soulful cool to "Waiting For You" and touches of soaring inspiration to the title track), Paul Jackson, Jr. (who played on Nowakowski's Polish-released debut *Smooth Night*), Alex AI, Tony Moore,

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Lenny Castro, Michael Landau and Dave Weckl. Now that he's put out one of urban jazz's best CDs of 2009, here's hoping Nowakowski will be visiting L.A. again soon—and often after that!

--Jonathan Widran, Rovi

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