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Willie Nelson & Family with Very Special Guest The Levon Helm Band

The title of Willie Nelson's solo debut on Blue Note Records, American Classic, refers as much to the man himself as to the storied Tin Pan Alley repertoire he explores on this elegant new set. While it's common now for mature pop artists to attempt to put their own stamp on the American Songbook, Nelson practically invented the approach. He set the standard for, well, playing the standards more than thirty years ago with Stardust, perhaps this "outlaw" entertainer's most daring move, an album that many industry pundits thought would get him laughed off the charts and out of the biz.

Instead, the Booker T. Jones-produced Stardust—which showcased material from the Gershwins, Duke Ellington, Hoagy Carmichael and Kurt Weill, among others, in spare, easy-going arrangements—became the most successful album of his career thus far. It reached #1 on the *Billboard's* Country Albums chart; racked up more than five million in sales; earned Nelson a Country Male Vocal Performance Grammy; and, most significantly, helped to transform a colorful, middle-aged cult figure into a mainstream star. Encouraging Nelson to record Stardust was Bruce Lundvall, now Blue Note's head, who had the prescience to sign Nelson to Columbia in the '70s and, thirty years later, offer him a home at Blue Note. Nelson's first effort for the label was his acclaimed 2008 collaboration with Wynton Marsalis, Two Men With the Blues, a spirited live set that debuted at #20 on the *Billboard* pop chart (Nelson's highest charting since Always On My Mind hit #2 in 1982).

Fans around the world know that the adventurous Nelson can sing just about anything—and with just about anyone he pleases. As he sees it, "The more songs you know, the more musicians you listen to, the more writers you hear, the better equipped you are to decide where you want to go next. That's why I want to listen to everyone and everything and then decide which way I want to go. Then, of course, I might change my mind and go in an entirely different direction. But at least I have all these options."

On American Classic, he's joined, on vocals and piano, by Diana Krall in an intimate rendition of "If I Had You" that feel more like pillow talk than mere wishful thinking. ("It came off so well—she's so smooth and her piano playing is the best," praises Nelson.) He also duets with Norah Jones, countering playful protestations with romantic persuasion on Frank Loesser's "Baby It's Cold Outside." ("That particular song has a lot of meaning for me," Nelson admits, "and it's obvious that I enjoy singing with her.") Backing musicians include such notable jazzmen as pianist Joe Sample, bassist Christian McBride, Krall guitarist Anthony Wilson, and drummer Lewis Nash; Nelson's longtime sidekick Mickey Raphael, his memorable co-star on Two Men with the Blues, plays harmonica, adding evocative, bluesy inflections to "Angel Eyes" and "Since I Fell For You."

American Classic represents old-school record-making at its most sumptuously swinging, with a

lighthearted yet sophisticated jazz feel. Three-time Grammy Award-winning producer Tommy LiPuma—known for his best-selling work with Natalie Cole, Barbra Streisand, Anita Baker, Michael Buble and Krall, among others—helmed the sessions, joined by his veteran engineer-mixer colleague, Al Schmitt. Legendary composer-arranger Johnny Mandel contributed orchestral charts.

When Blue Note chief Lundvall floated the idea of a standards album *à la Stardust* to LiPuma, the producer recalls, "I said, 'Man, are you kidding?' I love Willie and, on top of that, Stardust is my favorite album. Joe Sample and I work a lot together, so I thought I would use Joe to do the rhythm charts and set things up. Joe lives in Houston, and it's just a drive to Austin for him. We both visited Willie and went over numerous songs with him, maybe 30 to 40 songs."

Much of the repertoire, Nelson explains, "was picked by Tommy and Joe. They came to the house and we sat around and talked about songs, like 'The Nearness of You' and 'Angel Eyes,' which is one of my favorite jazz standards. We talked about a lot of great standards." The vintage tunes they chose, says Nelson, "are of the same quality as Stardust, but we did them a little differently. Tommy put together the band, with guys like Joe, who's an incredible musician and arranger. Stardust was recorded with my band, but this was done with musicians who were coming, musically, from another place. You can't beat the players you have on this one, they're as good as they get."

The key to the project, notes LiPuma, "was that we all realized how much we loved Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. That brought us all together. I was a big fan of Wills, as was Joe; Willie, of course, was a huge fan, as well as a huge fan of Django Reinhardt. So after we chose the songs and got the keys and all that stuff, we left a day or so to figure out what made the most sense as far as Willie was concerned, what Willie felt the most comfortable with. We ended up with a Django/Bob Wills feel to the arrangements and Willie fell right into it. 'The Nearness of You' was one of the first things that jumped right out, and from there we ended up doing about 16 or 17 tracks, then knocking it down to the ones we put on the album."

Nelson and LiPuma spent four days in December '08 at Legacy Studios in Manhattan, and then reconvened in February at the storied Capital Studio A in Los Angeles, where Frank Sinatra and Nat "King" Cole cut many of their best-known sides, to work with Diana Krall. Throughout the sessions, Nelson's singing retained its easygoing charm. There's warmth and humor in his delivery, along with some twinkle-in-the-eye sex appeal. Just check out his rendition of "On the Street Where You Live"—you can feel the eternal spring in his step.

Remarks LiPuma, "Willie is just the best to work with. He's a very sweet cat. You just go in there and if you get something and it feels right, it's right. You don't belabor it. That's the way I like to work, too. And that's basically how it was—we went into Legacy and within four days we got all 17 tracks. We did the Diana Krall duet in L.A. One take and boom, we were finished. Twenty minutes. That was it. The rhythm section really had a sense as to what Willie was all about. All these guys were just so respectful of the guy and what he did. They're great musicians in their own right but they all had huge respect for him and gave him all the room in the world."

As a Nashville artist in the '60s, Nelson himself penned more than a few tunes that have arguably become American classics themselves, including "Crazy," "Night Life" and the sublime "Funny How Time Slips Away." But that was just the prologue for the iconoclastic singer-songwriter, who would redraw the borders of country music in the '70s after moving back to Texas and settling in the musical melting pot of Austin. Along with fellow traveler Waylon Jennings, Nelson was labeled the outlaw of the genre, but he was more visionary than rebel, especially with the way he attracted rock fans to take a closer look at country. He was celebrated for his work with buddies like Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard, Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson, but scaled even greater chart heights by singing, improbably enough, with Julio Iglesias ("To All the Girls I Loved Before"). Along with Marsalis, recent cohorts have included Western swing band Asleep at the Wheel and reggae icon Ziggy Marley.

Nelson ends the album with a re-interpretation of "You Were Always On My Mind," the one-time Elvis Presley hit that Nelson took to #1 on the country chart and to Top Five on the pop chart in the early eighties. Looking back for a moment, Nelson decides, "Hopefully, I'm a better singer. Hopefully, I'm a better guitar player—you're either going to get better or worse, you can't stay in one spot. I like to think that the band and I have progressed a lot and learned a lot from doing these songs. There is truth in the statement that you learn by doing, so the more you do 'em, the better you get."

American Classic, then, is clearly Nelson at his best.