

# Whitney James

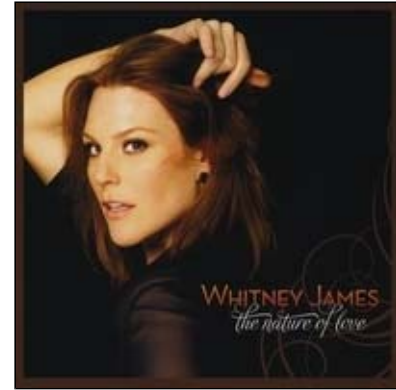
## The Nature of Love

**Artist Interview by:** [Beatrice Richardson](#)

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JAZZREVIEW: When did you discover you had a talent for singing?

WHITNEY JAMES: I was always singing and performing and choreographing shows at home from the time I was 5, my sister and friends were the cast and my Mom would hold a flash light as a spotlight. We would charge 10 cents a seat and have a stage, curtains everything. We sang and danced, and had a ball. I am sure that is where all my love of music started. My life was very full of music and my parents were big music lovers. I was always using their stereo and listening to records. I would put on a record and listen to it over and over again until I memorized each note and nuance. I would put the headphones on and sit there all day, record after record...I am sure my family was tortured listening to me sing the songs with only the headphones on!



I started dancing when I was five, so that was the first thing I studied. My sister is a great dancer as well and we both took lessons until we got to college age. After dance, I took piano lessons, and singing/acting was the last which I started when I was 10. I auditioned for a musical and during the dance audition I had to sing and the director really liked my voice and I ended up getting the lead in the show. After that show, I asked my Mom if I could have voice lessons.

My first vocal teacher was an opera singer named Eilana Lappalainen (<http://eilana.com/indexeng.htm>) so I started singing with a very good foundation and am classically trained. When I started taking lessons with her I had little more than a one octave range and it was very low for a girl who was ten. Eilana helped me strengthen my voice and bring out my top range and I now have over a five-octave range.

JAZZREVIEW: Who is your favorite jazz musician?

WHITNEY JAMES: Wow, this is difficult! I think of vocalist & instrumentalist as musicians so I first have to make that distinction...but I am assuming you want an instrumentalist... I can't pick as far as Instrumentalists go, I have a list – Miles Davis, Bill Evans, John Coltrane, Dexter Gordon, Duke Ellington, Chet Baker, Ingrid Jensen, Geoffrey Keezer.

JAZZREVIEW: What vocalists, jazz or otherwise influenced you growing up?

WHITNEY JAMES: Oh there are a lot of vocalists who influenced me growing up...my list...Sarah Vaughn, Shirley Horn, Carmen McRae, Rickie Lee Jones, Ella, Billie, Barbra Streisand, Aretha Franklin, Tina Turner, Nancy Wilson, Nancy Wilson from Heart, Bonnie Rait, Sting, Jimmy Hendrix, the list goes on forever!!

JAZZREVIEW: In your opinion, what is the single most difficult challenge jazz musicians face today?

WHITNEY JAMES: Well, I think the lack of venues to play coupled with the low pay in clubs. Somehow, somewhere jazz musicians started getting paid less and less, so it seems to be difficult to support yourself on playing jazz alone. Many musicians I know play all types of music to support themselves. The venue/pay issue coupled with the fact that jazz has been branded as intimidating or complicated for the average music listener...it is music, music is universal, it transcends boundaries of all kinds. People just need to listen to it and feel it, not over intellectualize it.

JAZZREVIEW: Do you have any certain theories on improvising and music in general?

WHITNEY JAMES: Well, I listen to and perform music that moves me. When I go hear music or listen at home, I expect to be transported out of my daily thoughts of life and into the moment - into the music.

When I am performing I simply want to connect to the music and be in the moment. There is a lovely thing that happens when the band is locked in, playing together and really listening to each other. I call it being "in the monster" – I think of music as a living, breathing entity, and being "in the monster" is just riding that wave together till the end of the song or performance. If you don't pay attention or over think it, it is easy to get thrown off...

JAZZREVIEW: What are the qualities you look for in a band?

WHITNEY JAMES: I look for people who are dedicated to their craft, who love music, love jazz, have a great attitude and vibe about them and love to play, create and practice. They have to be sensitive, swing hard and love to have fun and collaborate.

JAZZREVIEW: Compositionally speaking, what do you place first lyrics or music?

WHITNEY JAMES: Well, for me, being a singer, we have the added benefit of the words. The instrumentalists don't get those to play...The standards I am singing on the record have such amazing lyrics. They just don't write lyrics like that anymore. I fall in love with the melody first, but the lyrics are connected. Melody & music first, then the lyric I guess.

JAZZREVIEW: In performance lyrics or music first?

WHITNEY JAMES: Well, my job as a vocalist is to paint the picture for the audience of what the lyrics are saying. I think that lyrical interpretation as almost acting in a sense, sometimes you are singing about lost love or new love or whatever and you have to be true in performance to those lyrics and express that. I use the notes and take liberties with the melody to drive home a tune's lyrical idea. In performance I am just trying to connect to the lyric and them across in the most sensitive way.

JAZZREVIEW: Your surety of tone and intimate style of delivery is exceptional and inviting " The Nature of Love"

is just beautiful- your range, nuance and phrasing are fully captivating..

WHITNEY JAMES: Thank you very much. That is so nice of you to say. The songs on the album are really beautiful compositions so that is the foundation for everything else.

JAZZREVIEW: Tell me about your album "The Nature of Love" . Take us through the background as to how it came together.

WHITNEY JAMES: Well, I have wanted to do a CD for a very long time. I believe everything happens when it should and even though I would have liked for the CD to come out 5 or more years ago, now is the right time, I think. I have been working with Jay Clayton my teacher and mentor for 13 years. When it came time to start thinking about the CD she helped me pick the material. I had a song list of 30 songs I wanted to record and so we trimmed it and sculpted it. Jay suggested Ingrid Jensen, who's playing I have loved and it just so happens Ingrid is married to a friend of mine from the Seattle days and it all just fell right and fell into place.

I had two rehearsals with the rhythm section and one with Ingrid and the same was true for the recording session. One day with rhythm section and one day with Ingrid in the studio. We recorded each song three times only and that was it - we didn't want to over play or over think the tunes. You can start playing the life out of them if you record take after take and so we tried to be conscious of that.

The songs are a combination of new songs for me and some that have been with me for a very long time. When thinking about arrangements or feels of the songs, I took them each as an experience how they make me feel lyrically and went from there with the band... I hope people like the music and hope our interpretations resonate with people.

The songs on *The Nature of Love* are all about love, the nature of love is that it is heartbreaking, joyful, wistful, filled with longing, peaceful, open, exciting, hopeful, sorrowful etc...There are so many facets of love and that is truly the nature of it. The songs on this album really feature those facets.

JAZZREVIEW: My two favorites are "Tenderly" and "Long Ago and Far Away." I think both are brilliant songs. What was your inspiration for each of those?

WHITNEY JAMES: Oh, "Tenderly" is one of my favorites. For me it is about new love, discovering that love and how it is fresh and light and delicate. I love the tune and the feel the waltz is my favorite. Such great movement. The end of the tune is my favorite the band really kicks in and Ingrid and I get to play together and the horn and voice weave together in that section in a really lovely way. "Long Ago & Far Away" is really about wishing for love and then it coming into your life. That song for me is all about my husband, Bob. It really swings and the band sounds great...just happy, upbeat and groovin'!

JAZZREVIEW: Looking ahead what are your hopes and inspiration over the next twelve months?

WHITNEY JAMES: Oh my goodness, I would love to play around the US, Canada, Europe

and Asia. I just want to make good music, keep improving my craft and learn, learn, learn more. I would love to play at some the amazing jazz festivals in the US and Canada. I would love to keep playing with great musicians. I hope to be lucky enough to play music as often as possible.

JAZZREVIEW: What's next for Whitney James?

WHITNEY JAMES: Continue to sing & play jazz music. I would love to tour more to support the CD release and get the music out there for folks to hear. I would like to start working on another CD. I can only hope people enjoy my singing and connect to it and hopefully that will afford me the opportunity to continue doing what I love.

JAZZREVIEW: What advice would you give an aspiring new jazz vocalist or musician?

WHITNEY JAMES: Listen to a ton of jazz musicians and singers. Practice your instrument or singing; play as much as you can. Play music outside of jazz. Have fun and explore your sound. Study with a great teacher who inspires you and keep moving on your musical path. You will find your way.

After hearing *The Nature of Love*, I have no doubt that the excitement is already here! Thank you for the interview, Whitney, and congratulations on *The Nature of Love*.

The Concert was sponsored by The Al Downing Tampa Bay Jazz Association & Dar Webb & Clint Page.

**For more information:** <http://whitneyjames.com>

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