

# ERIC LEGNINI – WAXX UP

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The very first track of *Waxx up* sets the mood and gets to the core of the matter. In “I Want You Back”, the piano is quite scarce but the rhythm is fierce, the brass section is demonstrative and the singing voice breathes of funk... A result three and a half minutes long, all in one breath, wholly committed to the song. This new record shows Eric Legnini switching roles, and therefore perspective: the revered pianist becomes a producer, devoting extra care to what a powerful tune can do. Eric Legnini has been serving jazz for twenty-five years; under his own name or as a special guest, the theme master has nothing much to prove. This particular chapter is not necessarily over, only this time he has decided to honour the raw material which fuels his work, the black wax in which his music has always dug deep for inspiration, and which has gradually shaped his style—a powerful yet light swing, a groove both earthly and exalted, all captured in the tracks he has been chasing after for years. That is the reason why the title should be understood as a pun; *Waxx up* speaks volume into our soul, as suggested by the loudspeaker on the sleeve’s visuals.

“Wax is my roots! Vinyl records, sampling, the seventies—all these are ingrained in my musical culture”, says this record junkie who never misses an occasion to dig through a crate of LPs.

In his home studio, a Lee Dorsey single lays around proudly—it is an original pressing of “Get Out Of My Life Woman”, the emblematic track of one of the greatest voices of New Orleans. More than a mere detail, the song can be used here as a guiding principle for the listening of this new album, which may actually come across as a sum of Legnini-produced EPs. From the demo versions to the finishing touches, from the trio rehearsals to the studio sessions, two years were needed for the project to be brought to fruition. A meticulous work during which the pianist-in-chief conducted a voice casting and selected the different ranges of the singers depending on the atmosphere he wished to instil. “I steered the singers quite a lot so that they could fit the colours I wanted. I had to pick the right voices to carry the songs with as much conviction as possible.” Such is Legnini’s overall motto on his new record.

From Kayna Samet to Kellylee Evans, Legnini—who goes by the moniker of Moogoo when making hip-hop tracks—has been extensively credited on the work of others. Just like he has accompanied singers as diverse as Claude Nougaro, Souleymane Diamanka or Christophe, this isn’t the first time he invites singers to collaborate on his records, as previous albums *The Vox* or *Sing Twice* prove. As a matter of fact, some of the artists he has worked with in the past are invited on this record. Englishman Hugh Coltman, co-writer of the lyrics, makes use of his impeccable phrasing on “The Sun Will Dance” whose melody is quite reminiscent of Stevie Wonder although the general framework of the song actually relies on the harmony of “Giant Steps”, the totemic Coltrane theme remodelled to Legnini’s liking. Canadian Kellylee Evans also lends a hand, with some highly refined back-up vocals on the track.

Thanks to a resolutely more electro theme with quite abstract contours, his long-time friendship with Yael Naïm is finally laid down on record. Remarkable though it may be, the effort is not as surprising as Matthieu Boogaert’s unexpected mellow crooner performance on a low-tempo ballad, although one must say the part perfectly fits his natural nonchalance. Eric Legnini has also invited actress Anaëlle Potdevin to do her recording début, and her husky voice is very much in keeping with the spirit of the song she performs. From the brilliant British scene, soul mother Nathalie Williams—whom Eric Legnini met on the set of an Arte show—displays a higher pitch which offers a perfect contrast to the shimmering atmosphere of “Living For Tomorrow”. On “Run With It”, Californian artist Charles X brings together rap flow and soul groove with the ease of those who can do as they please. Last but not least, American Michelle Willis sings on “I Want You Back”, “The Parkway”, “Maybe” and “Sick&Tired”. These four songs exhibit the qualities of Michael League’s protégée (producer and bass player from Snarky Puppy), whose voice belongs to the great folk soul tradition Eric Legnini adores. In his own words, “I’m not sure I would have dared make such a record had I not met her.”

As distinct as all these voices might be, they echo that of Legnini himself, who has hand-crafted all these various sounds so that each timbre may rivet us. His musicians were conducted with that same mindset, starting with the duo on which he relied to build the whole repertoire: Franck Agulhon (drums, percussions) and Daniel Romeo (bass guitar, guitar). Everything is performed, nothing is planned, and when the time comes for sampling, Eric Legnini draws from this original material. "I was obsessed with the efficiency of the sound, of the hooks", all these details that catch our ears by pleasant surprise thanks to the right gimmick. The interplay of the jazz trio does not disappear, but it manifests itself on a more occasional note, in the background. "I allowed myself interventions that are not strictly speaking electro or funk. I didn't want to curb or restrain them. Daniel and Franck could let go and do their thing whenever they felt like it, providing it served the intentions of the song", the most Belgian of all Parisians insists. In keeping with those intentions, the brass section comes in and adds another dimension to the whole, or rather another dynamic. Neither too much, nor too little, only what is needed, when it is needed. Take these instrumental sections he inserts like so many B-sides. "Black Samurai", à la Herbie Hancock from the 70's; "Here Comes The Beat Man", a nod to "Here Comes the Meter Man" and which is evocative of the light yet intense groove of drummer Zigaboo Modeliste; "The Wire", in a more pumped-up house register with Ibrahim Maalouf's trumpet and, in way of conclusion, "Lagos 75", a festive yet introspective afro-funk track. While the track could keep going on and on, time remains precious: everything is wrapped up in less than five minutes.

No doubt about it: Eric Legnini crosses a threshold and takes a decisive step. "For this record, I am more of a producer than a pianist. This time I am comfortable with the less acoustic, less jazzy aspect of the record, though it is still there for those who listen closely." He does pop up to play the Wurlitzer, the Fender Rhodes, the Clavinet but he doesn't dwell long at the grand piano, though he fully masters its 88 black and ivory keys. Getting lost in endless solos was out of the question. There was no way he was going to move away from the direction he was bound to follow, this idea he had had in mind for years. Time nurtured it and the point of the project is all the more precise, concise and devoid of taboo. Depending on the meaning of the song, Legnini puts an emphasis on sound, on technique... "Only the song can decide what is to happen. I very much stuck to this idea!" The result is a collection of short, pop and soul-oriented tracks, between acoustic and electronic music, between yesterday and today, by a man whose references are Chicagoan producer Charles Stepney and Londoner Mark Ronson. To put it simply: an old-school yet not backward-looking sound. "This record contains all the kinds of music that nurtured me: from hip-hop to soul, from funk jazz to present-day r'n'b. I am not trying to hide the sources of my inspiration, I'm simply giving my own version of them."