

## SPIRO GYRA

### THEY HELPED PUT THE SMOOTH IN JAZZ



By Glenn Swift

"I didn't know who or what I was hearing, I just knew it was perfect," said jazz great Walter Beasley recently, when recalling the first time he heard Spiro Gyra's groundbreaking *Morning Dance* album back in 1979. Comments such as Beasley's are commonplace and reflect just how potent a force this incredible group has been in the development of contemporary jazz over the past three decades. As the recipients of the prestigious Benson Lifetime Achievement Award earlier this year, Spiro Gyra remains one of the most influential acts in modern jazz. Clearly, the band's longevity has not diminished its creative and competitive edge. The group's recent CD, *Good To Go-Go*, released in May of this year, has been nominated for a Grammy in the Best Pop Instrumental Album category.

"Spiro Gyra has always been about looking ahead and not backward," said Spiro Gyra saxophonist and

co-founder Jay Beckenstein. "It's a very upbeat record. The title comes from the title of a track by bassist Scott Ambush, and it's just right for a record with this kind of vibe. We are a band that's on the move and firing on all cylinders."

Born in Brooklyn, Beckenstein grew up in a musical family. "My mother was an opera singer and my father's love of jazz introduced me to Charlie Parker, Lester Young, and Louis Armstrong at a very young age. Before I could speak, I loved jazz."

Unlike most youngsters growing up in the 1950s, young Beckenstein had little time for Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. "We never played rock n' roll in our house," he said. The jazz superstar then made a startling confession. "I was a jazz snob at 11."

If it's any consolation, Beckenstein also added, "But I'm not a jazz snob anymore."

In all seriousness, Beckenstein took to music very quickly. "I started piano at the age of five when my family moved to Farmingdale, LI. I was given my first saxophone through the music program in elementary school at age seven. From there, I took saxophone lessons and played in school bands up to my senior year in high school. At that point I met Jeremy Wall, and we started my first band. My senior year was spent in Nuremberg, Germany, where my father was working. I went to school on a U.S. Army Base, where I played in R&B bands that performed for the Army and in German clubs. By then, I had been introduced to a lot of R&B and rock and started to mix those concepts together with my jazz base."

Beckenstein then returned to the States and enrolled at State University of New York at Buffalo. "I studied a good deal of classical and avant garde music in the music program there and played in some interesting avant garde ensembles. I studied saxophone in school with Edward Yadzinski, but I also studied outside with John Sadola, who helped me with my jazz technique."

While in his junior year, Beckenstein began showing clear signs of his future brilliance. "I began working in the clubs in Buffalo, and, by the time I graduated, I had steady work in the clubs. The next few years were spent playing in some great blues and R&B bands. Buffalo had a booming

music scene at the time, but after awhile I wanted to do something other than be a sideman. I then started doing some off night instrumental sessions in small clubs with Jeremy Wall. This work slowly evolved into the band Spiro Gyra. In the band's second year, Tom Schuman joined the band and started to share the keyboards with Jeremy. Tom has been the sole keyboardist since 1978."

Around 1976, Beckenstein went into business with Rich Calandra, a local drummer who had aspirations to be a record producer. The two produced a number of local acts and, when there was studio time left over, eventually recorded their first album, *Spiro Gyra*.

The rest as they say is history. The group was an overnight sensation and has helped to popularize and mold a genre that is still evolving. As for the focus of the band all these years, Beckenstein summed it up this way.

"We always listen to what's new so we know what's out there, but we've never thought in commercial terms. We just try to make great music the only way we know how."

Don't miss the chance to hear Spiro Gyra and Mindi Abair live and in person on Saturday, August 18 at the King Center at 3865 N. Wickham Rd. in Melbourne. For more information, call (321) 242 2219 or visit [www.kingcenter.com](http://www.kingcenter.com).