



**Featured Artist: Nnenna Freelon**

## **CD Title: Better Than Anything, The Quintessential Nnenna Freelon**

**Year:** 2008

**Record Label:** Concord Records

**Style:** Straight-Ahead / Classic

**Review:**

There was a time when the only way you could make a name for yourself as a jazz vocalist was to have something individualistic to offer. Unfortunately, there are precious few jazz vocalists working today with unique and personal stylistic characteristics. It might be trite but it's true, so many of today's singers all sound the same and have nothing new to offer the jazz canon. Standing out among the few with a distinctive approach is the extraordinary Nnenna Freelon.

*Better Than Anything* is a compilation of 12 tracks from five of her six CDs recorded for Concord Records, as well as one track from her UTV release, *Church*. The wide extent of diverse styles and her always sincere range of personal heartfelt expression is exceptional. Rarely does an artist release a number of recordings with a single label that are all at a high artistic level, but this collection proves there were no missteps during her time at Concord. Sincerely, every track is a gem.

Her *a capella* medium swing version of "Straighten Up And Fly Right" with Take 6 from *Soulcall* is stellar; they truly dance around each other in perfect accord. The harmonic bed created by the great vocal ensemble perfectly affords Freelon the necessary freedom allowing her to take unexpected melodic risks that pay off in huge rewards. No matter where her voice goes, the choices are always exciting.

Freelon's duet with bassist Wayne Batchelor on "Better Than Anything," which leads off the album, accurately displays her immense and tasteful creativity. Her short distance glissandos are handled with supreme technical agility that respects jazz's history and works to serve the music first. Her scat solo is sublime; she encapsulates Ella Fitzgerald's lighthearted style as well as Mel Torme's humoristic touches, yet finds ways to make the vocal improvisational art bend in her own inimitable manner.

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Other highlights include a suave and seductive version of "The Tears Of A Clown" and "Ooh Child." The first features a great saxophone solo by Chris Potter and a rhythm arrangement that is locked so deep in the pocket you'd have to pull it with the force a Mack truck to get it out. The second is a nice take on the pop classic here given a nice two-beat jazzy rearrangement. You really can't loose with anything Freelon has done, but this disc is a great introduction for those unfamiliar with her art.

**Record Label Website:** <http://www.concordmusicgroup.com/>

**Reviewed by:** Thomas R. Erdmann

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