

CD Review/ Jan McDonald's "Sweet" by Michael Handler

The recently released "Sweet" by trumpet player Jan McDonald is a sweet surprise indeed. One might expect a safe and predictable outing for a first recording as a leader, but "Sweet" takes the listener in a few new directions, but the ride is always smooth and pleasant. The CD has 11 tracks, four 1/2 of which are written by Jan, one each by Bert Dalton and Jon Gagan, co-producers of the date. (I'll explain the 1/2 a bit later). The core of the band is indeed Bert Dalton's regular trio of Bert on piano, Rob 'Milo' Jaramillo on bass, and drummer John Bartlit, which gives the entire CD a strong backbone of players who know each other so well. But outside of that, various elements were introduced that added a new dimension to the sounds, such as a string section or saxes in all sizes.

The entire CD is a joy to listen to, but I'll mention some of the highlights for my ears. The title track "Sweet" brings us a treat with the addition of another local trumpet man of note, Bobby Shew. It's a nice gesture from Jan to invite such a trumpet luminary to join his first CD, especially on the first track. The original tune has an easy swing to it and Bobby kills..what tone! The CD gets serious with track 2, "Where Sea Meets Sky", a Bert Dalton original, with a beautiful string section no less. (At first, I thought this was a synth patch until I read the credits...). And being a Bert Dalton composition, I understood that given his druthers, he'd much rather use the real deal than music from a box. Bert's sentiments can be expressed either in a trio setting or with a small orchestra, and his production chops are well up to the task whatever the set-up. And Jan's *flumpet*, a flugelhorn/trumpet combination, is perfect for this tune and arrangement. The more I listen to the CD, the more I realize that if nothing else, "Sweet" is a collaboration of three elements, all working together. These elements are: Jan McDonald and his fine horn(s), the Bert Dalton Trio, and team of Bert Dalton/Jon Gagan as producers, tying all these elements together. Back to the tunes: The intro to my funny valentine is nice and another interesting bit of misdirection with the piano intro by Mr. Dalton. Very pretty tune, and sustained at a very slow tempo. The track also introduced us to the beautiful bari sax work of Arlen Asher, who blends his lower register voice with Jan's trumpet, weaving lines together like two slow dancers. A great Valentine's Day song! Again, the producers sought to bring out the dynamics of using both a baritone and trumpet on the same tune, and it works marvelously. Actually, Mr. Asher should be noted as a fourth element to the success of this CD, as he appears as an important voice on two other tracks. Track 4, "Sweet Thing", another play on words and written by Jan McDonald as well, features yet another combination of Jan's trumpet with the wonderfully full-toned alto flute playing of Dave Anderson. The tune has a relaxed, swinging groove to it, a toe tapper indeed. The low, full voice of Dave Anderson's flute flows out of the music in perfect time and pitch. It should be noted here that one can tell the musicians took their time making this CD. The date has a relaxed, gently swinging groove to it, with a "no hurries- no worries" feel throughout. Jan is no angry young man with an agenda or something to get off his chest. I'm sure he's long past that (if was indeed part of his musical persona at all...). This is a mature, relaxed and refreshing CD, and belies the fact it's Jan's first date as a leader. The band operated away from the "let's do some standards" comfort zone, and I believe the results speak for themselves. Even the Latin tune swings! Man, track 5 gets swung....in fact it's part of the title, "Adagio Swung (Based on a melody by Antonio Albinoni)". Steve Marsh adds his tenor sax voice to the tune, and even Eddie Daniels helps in the

production department. Jan and bassist Jon Gagan have fun in a duo setting on Jon's composition "Ballpark Figures", then comes a slow tempo reading of the Luis Bonfa classic "Black Orpheus", just in time for Carnival. Arlen Asher adds his full voiced alto flute, alternating the lines of the theme with Jan's clear trumpet, and interlacing a short solo before a long-overdue bass solo from Rob "Milo" Jaramillo. Lovely tune. The next tune once again involves a full string section or more of a chamber orchestra reading of "Fiddler on the Roof", with an intro with more than a nod in the classical direction. (This is Jan's contribution to the tune, so that's where the ½ credit comes from.) Maybe Jan is showing us his other classical side, for which he does have the chops, but fear not, jazz lovers, once we're in the Fiddler section of the tune, we're swinging! And Mr. John Bartlit gets some well deserved solo time in there as well. It's an interesting twist to the CD. (I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall at the pre-production meetings for this date!) In track 9, "Alone Together", I like the way the band double times the tempo before taking out the theme at the end. Again, it helps having a working band to record with, with everyone knowing the other players so well. It gives this CD a very spontaneous feel. Being a blues lover and player, I love the way the CD ends with the tune "Sorry Bastard Blues", another original by Mr. McDonald. It has a down-in-New-Orleans slow smoky flavor, with Jan using the plunger mute to warble the sound, and trombonist Ed Ulman doing the same on his sweet voiced solo. (See, there that word again!) A fun way to end the CD indeed.