

Devon Sproule, Keep Your Silver Shined

Another great young songwriter and guitarist (and singer). What I like most about Devon is how she's internalized the jazz and swing music that color her songs. Instead of trying to write a "jazz standard" or simply imitate swing music, she uses jazz's harmonic and rhythmic signatures as part of the music she draws on to construct her songs.

The logo for AllMusic, featuring the word "allmusic" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The "a" and "l" are in a darker blue, while "music" is in a lighter blue.**Devon Sproule****Keep Your Silver Shined**

★★★★1/2

Devon Sproule's vintage dresses suggest a Gillian Welch acolyte worshipping at the shrine of the Carter Family. But if the 24-year-old singer/songwriter isn't exactly averse to playing that sepia-tinged trump card (witness the traditional "The Weeping Willow"), she's far too adventurous to settle for easy comparisons. That restless, eclectic spirit is what transforms *Keep Your Silver Shined* into the best album of the young artist's already noteworthy career.

Sproule served notice with 2003's *Upstate Songs*: she is an enormously gifted singer and songwriter, spinning out songs full of finely realized details, and singing with unrestrained playfulness and glee. If anything, *Keep Your Silver Shined* ups the ante.

The spare accompaniment of the previous album is replaced here by a full if idiosyncratic band consisting of upright bass, acoustic and electric guitars, pedal steel, brushed drums, and clarinet. Sproule's formerly pensive coming-of-age songs give way on this album to joyful, woozy celebrations of love, as song after song chronicles her recent courtship and marriage to folk artist Paul Curreri. And the New York of *Upstate Songs* is here replaced by a distinctly Southern setting, as Sproule returns to her native Virginia.

Her considerable charms are best exhibited on the album's centerpiece, the marvelously languid "Dress Sharp, Play Well, Be Modest." Behind an atmospheric country-noir accompaniment that gives her plenty of room to stretch out vocally, Sproule conjures images of a lazy summer evening in the South, a lingering conversation over rum-ginger zingers, the slow, languorous turning from friendship to something more than friendship. It's a perfectly realized moment, augmented by singing that is equal parts Joni Mitchell folk confessional and Victoria Williams looseness and sweet playfulness. And it's emblematic of the album as the whole.

Sproule revels in her new life, taking inventory of a hundred minor joys on the title track, turning the cabin fever lament of "Let's Go Out" into what ought to be a new jazz standard, complete with swinging Benny Goodman clarinet solo, and transforming "Old Virginia Block" into a celebratory bluegrass stomp.

It's a marvelous collection of songs and, frankly, it evokes a sense of place better than any album since Lucinda Williams' 1999 masterpiece *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*. Yes, alt-country and singer/songwriter fans, it's that's good. Much has been made of Devon Sproule's youth and precocious gifts, but this kind of musical wine is rare in any vintage: sweetness and wisdom, memorable words and melodies that hallow the simplest acts of life. "Let the humidity curl your hair/And the mulberries stain your toes," Sproule sings on "Stop by Anytime." With an album this warm and inviting, you'll gladly take her up on the offer.

by Andy Whitman