

Devon Sproule : Keep Your Silver Shined

Hearing 24-year-old Devon sing, you imagine a performer from bygone, simpler times. With her fourth album clocking in at 34 minutes, there's further simplicity. No clutter, nothing overblown. Everything short, sweet and engaging.

The Canada-born and Virginia-based singer takes everyday concern as her inspiration and flavours her songs with elements of folk, blues, country, even jazz and swing. Mostly it's her own material but the closing number, a reverential rendition of the trad. "The Weeping Willow", perfectly illustrates the timeless quality of her work.

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On your first listen to "Keep Your Silver Shined," concentrate on the musical settings for Devon Sproule's warm, perceptive words. With tunes owing as much to Tin Pan Alley as they do to the folk and bluegrass of her home in the Blue Ridge, think of Sproule as a "Rain Dogs" era Tom Waits if he were a happy newlywed. (Check the accordion and thumb piano she's cooked up with producer Jeff Romano for the tango-ish "1340 Chesapeake St.")

Sproule can sing like an angel, but prefers to keep this affair a little rough, as proclaimed by Randall Phar's slap happy bass and the banjo chunking that open the record. While Morwenna Lasko's fiddle keeps things swinging, "Old Virginia Block" traces the speaker's steps on a long Blue Ridge walk that ends at home. Try not to tap a toe. The title track follows, with Charlie Bell's pedal steel washing over loveliness depicting young folks facing the comfort and apprehension of settling into a life that could last a lifetime ("the best of us changed. The rest of us stuck behind to keep the silver shined").

"Let's Go Out" demonstrates Sproule's uncanny matching of lyrics and music. In homage to old time swing, she sings "though the jokes you told were splendid, the serenade had ended by January. When you wooed me in June, it was by a different tune. In spring came the ring" The highlight of the CD is "Dress Sharp, Play Well, Be Modest." Notice how genially Sproule's vocals build and how affecting they are when they reach their crescendo. This album is about home and joy -- rare commodities on record these days. Sproule succeeds by letting the arrangements support the telling details of her observant poetry. I was once a newlywed in a house that "felt like the center of the world." "Stop By Anytime" and you might find a blaze in the woodstove and a record on the turntable that will always evoke those days for me. "Keep Your Silver Shined" does the same for a new generation looking down the long road ahead.

-- David Kleiner