George Duke - DreamWeaver (2013)



01. DreamWeaver [1:28] 02. Stones Of Orion [6:27] 03. Trippin' [4:22] 04. AshTray [4:01] 05. Missing You [5:45] 06. Transition 1 [0:14] 07. Change The World [5:55] 08. Jazzmatazz [4:45] 09. Round The Way Girl [4:11] 10. Transition 2 [0:18] 11. Brown Sneakers [6:10] 12. You Never Know [4:03] 13. Ball & Chain [5:58] 14. Burnt Sausage Jam [15:32] 15. Happy Trails [5:02]

Before I can get to the task of reviewing the latest effort from George Duke, there's something bothering me about how this album was introduced:

"Out of devastating pain comes Dreamweaver from keyboardist/composer/arranger/producer George Duke."

This was the headline of the press statement that accompanied the disc for review. It's as if the promotional team behind the press release were trying to wring every single ounce of sensationalism out of Duke's extenuating circumstances while assembling this record, fishing for a headline. And leading the tale of the tape with said tabloid fodder? All I can say is wow. This is George Duke we're talking about here, not Brandi Glanville. With that said, it should be noted that I, indeed, fell for it. I had to read more about this "devastating pain" immediately. I delved in head first, voraciously absorbing the written information, pre-processing the meat of the review whilst delicately arranging my potatoes. My expectations after reading the press release were rife with daydreams of music derived from deep, emotional pain and inner conflict, which usually leads to profound expression and the making of some heady, pervasive sounds in the process (more on that later)... and there lies the problem I have with the pitch. It's misleading.

Dreamweaver is more of a celebration of all styles that George Duke has mastered over his half-century career, with a couple of exceptions. He doesn't touch much on his Zappa influence, or bring a funk rave a-la "Dukey Stick" to the mix. What he does bring is an all-star cast of superb interpreters, a wide range of stylistic impressions to explore, and a sense of who he is as a musician. Duke takes you through jazz, R&B, soul, smooth jazz, funk and remote tributaries of the aforementioned. There's a collaboration with Teena Marie (one of her final unreleased recordings), "Ball and Chain", which is showing up for the first time here. The rest of the all-star collabs feature the likes of Stanley Clarke, Christian McBride, Jeffrey Osborne, Rachelle Ferrell, and Lalah Hathaway. A lot of the more commercial-leaning cuts deal with stereotypical lyrical topics, but that aspect can easily be forgiven when you listen to master musicians play. What really can't be forgiven are the use of harsh synth voices, poorly envisioned samples, and boring drum sequences. Luckily, it's found on very few of the selections. Highlights include "Stones of Orion" (there's definitely some heady, pervasive sounds here), "Ball and Chain", and "Burnt Sausage Jam". The album ends with a truly unique cover of "Happy Trails". Avoid "Change the World", unless "We Are the World" still lives somewhere in the abyss that is your iPod, and you grant it access to your ears on a regular basis. If so, this song is all you.

Even though Duke dealt with the death of his spouse while making this album, this life-altering event is not what Dreamweaver is about, not entirely. Not even primarily. He does explore his emotions on the subject, but it's just a small facet of the whole. It's more about George Duke the man rediscovering George Duke the artist, getting back to where you came from so you can move on to the next great innovation. At least that's what I take from it. More joy than pain.
---Neil Kelly, popmatters.com

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