

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

CD reviews: Whitney James' debut showcases a powerful voice

By staff and wire reports

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'THE NATURE OF LOVE'

Whitney James (Damsel fly)

Singer Whitney James excels on her debut release, "The Nature of Love," but she gets great help from trumpet and flugelhorn player Ingrid Jensen. James would not have needed it, though. Her voice is as good as her interpretation of song. That emerges early in the album, when she adds to Benny Golson's "Whisper Not" the famous opening of Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight." In the main lines of that song, James adds a bit of restrained nasality that adds to the individuality of her tone. She doesn't have to add such stylistic moves, however, as she shows on Jimmy Rowles' "A Timeless Place," which she offers with straight beauty, unerring tonality and clear tone. Along with that wonderful voice, Jensen's horn is always present. That shows clearly on "How Deep is the Ocean" on which Jensen offers brief fill statements in the first chorus, then lays out on the second and on a piano solo before returning for a flugelhorn solo. The album is filled with romantic songs but never gets sappy -- another plus.

— Bob Karlovits

'THE DEVIL TRIED TO KILL ME'

David Murray and the Gwo Ka Masters (Justin Time)

Reed player David Murray's "The Devil Tried to Kill Me" gives world music a touch that makes it accessible to jazz fans. The album is a look at the heritage of the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, where independence from slavery preceded that in the United States by nearly 100 years. It features Murray on tenor saxophone and bass clarinet, singers Taj Mahal and Sista Kee and a seven-piece band doing songs that blend ethnic and jazz sounds. The album is dominated by two songs: "Africa," a love song to a continent, and "Southern Skies," a rhythm-and-blues song about the country's legacy featuring the two singers and Murray. Aside from radio edits of those two songs, none of the pieces are less than seven minutes long, creating room for energetic solos, particularly from the tonally rich Murray.

— Bob Karlovits

'DOWNTOWN CHURCH'

Patty Griffin (EMI/Credential)

Patty Griffin really did go to church for her seventh album. "Downtown Church" was recorded in Nashville's historic Downtown Presbyterian Church -- fitting, because the set focuses on gospel songs and hymns. The esteemed singer and songwriter contributes only two originals, although, typically, "Little Fire" and "Coming Home to Me" are strong entrants that fit the theme. Working with producer-guitarist Buddy Miller, Griffin sounds equally at home with black and white gospel traditions, from Hank Williams' "House of Gold" to Dorothy Love Coates' "The Strange Man." In one case -- "Virgen de Guadalupe" -- she also draws from the Hispanic well. She is helped by an outstanding cast of singers -- Emmylou Harris, Jim Lauderdale, Mike Farris, Raul Malo, Shawn Colvin, Regina and Ann McCrary, and Buddy and Julie Miller. The performances are rarely of the roof-raising variety, but Griffin's eclecticism proves liberating. Her varied choices add up to a personal vision that only enhances the overall power of the collection.

— *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

'CRAZY HEART: ORIGINAL MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK'

Various artists (New West)

The soundtrack to "Crazy Heart," in which Jeff Bridges plays a hard-living, seen-better-days country singer, boasts some impressive talents. The producers are T Bone Burnett and the late Stephen Bruton, both of whom also penned much of the top-flight original material. Up-and-coming Texas troubadour Ryan Bingham writes and sings, and the accompanists include such aces as guitarist Buddy Miller and pedal-steel player Greg Leisz. And sprinkled throughout are vintage cuts by the likes of Buck Owens, the Louvin Brothers and Waylon Jennings. None of this would amount to much, however, if Bridges couldn't pull off his role -- if he couldn't sound like a real country singer. But the great actor does. Mostly it's in a Guy Clark kind of way -- weathered and conversational and knowing on numbers such as "Hold on You" and "Brand New Angel," but adding some vigor when the tempo picks up on "Somebody Else." Fellow actor Colin Farrell also acquits himself well on the twang-fueled romp "Gone Gone Gone."

— *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

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