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By AIMSEL L. PONTI

LOCAL MUSIC REVIEW

JASON SPOONER: "The Flame You Follow"

Jason Spooner's latest record is destined for my list of favorites when the end of the year rolls around.

"The Flame You Follow" contains 10 originals and one downright terrific Talking Heads cover. This is one of the CDs that I slid into my CD player and was immediately drawn into. It didn't take a few listenings, and the repeat button didn't need to be pushed (though it was). I dare say this record is that good.

"Flame" is rife with songs that will have you singing along after a few times through. It has a '70s FM rock kind of feel to it and a real, if I may invent a word, "albumness," with songs that flow together without sounding all the same.

Spooner starts it off with "Black and Blue," a crisp, acoustic-guitar-driven song with keenly measured percussion from Reed Chambers and the upright bass of Andy Rice, who also provides back-up vocals. The refrain sticks its landing. "You thought you had me fooled./Now I hope you think about it every day./that's how I'll think of you, what can I do?/It's how I'll remember you, in black and blue." I heard this one on the radio the other day, so keep an ear out for it.

Rice's bass is the cornerstone of "All That We Know," a moody murder ballad during which mistakes are made, blood is spilled and there's a shotgun under the bed.

"Spaceship" is one of my favorites. With the addition of Spooner's harmonica and Hammond organ and guest musician Tom Whitehead's accordion, this song got me singing as though it were a song I'd known for years. "I've been dreaming of a spaceship./It's going to take me out to sea,/work me over like a facelift,/erase my long-term memory."

But let's put the comparisons on the shelf because Spooner's voice is fresh, authentic and distinct. Combined with the story-telling narration of some of the songs and the gorgeous melodies of others, Spooner hits the mark every time.

"Hazel," another standout, features back-up vocals from Kim Taylor and the piano of Karl Anderson. This song could be a tearjerker, depending on your frame of mind.

Spooner invited a few more guests into the studio for this record: Tim Carbone contributes strings and Abbie Gardner plays dobro and sings backup on "Meant to Be," a pensive foray into the landscape of ancient wisdom.

Just when you've settled back into your chair and closed your eyes, sinking right into the music, along comes "Simple Life." This is the most upbeat tune on the record with a funky groove to it, helped in part by the saxophone of Ryan Zoidis, which first sticks a toe in and then dives headlong into the song. I imagine live this would be a "bring 'em to the dance floor" song for sure.



This record didn't need a cover song, but I found it impossible not to love Spooner's take on Talking Heads' "Slippery People." Kim Taylor's vocals are in it, and Spooner renders it recognizable yet poles apart from the original. I imagine he knew it would be a mistake to try to imitate anything David Byrne had touched, and so he does nothing of the sort. Instead he takes a superb song and puts his own clever stamp on it.

"Hover" closes the record. Again you'll hear Karl Anderson on piano, Kim Taylor's vocals and the violin of none other than Andy Happel. This one's a five-and-a-half-minute poetic journey into and through the jagged edges of relationships ended. Perhaps following a bit in the steps of Damien Rice, Spooner has Taylor take lead on a verse of the song, which Rice has done with Lisa Hannigan. Taylor sounds like a lovely specter who's been having tea with Kristin Hirsch. Her voice is rejoined with Spooner's while Andy Happel's violin gently soars. "We can look away from this disaster/if I cut my conscience in thirds./Watch the red sun sinking faster,/it hovers like murder and words,/murder and words"

"The Flame You Follow" was made with engineer whiz Jon Wyman and was recorded in the dead of winter in a small rural studio. You can find it, as well as Spooner's first record, "Lost Houses," at Bull Moose Music locations and at www.cdbbay.com.