

Ron Sunshine: *DELUXE*
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By Freddie Felch

If James Brown were to seek early retirement, there is an excellent chance that the mantle of Hardest Working Man in Show Business would be passed on to Jazz and R&B vocalist/harmonica player/songwriter/producer Ron Sunshine. Since the beginning of the 90s, Sunshine and his bands--funk/soul outfit The Smoking Section, and the jazzier Full Swing--have performed hundreds of shows per year, dazzling audiences from New York to Los Angeles, from Paris to Stockholm, from Bermuda to Red Bank. Now, with only one band to play all of his material, Sunshine is weaving genres together into a new kind of stylistic fabric.

His fifth CD, *Deluxe* (©2003 Golden Bug Records) finds him back on familiar turf in some ways, while breaking new ground in many others. Like his early Smoking Section efforts, there is an emphasis on hard driving blues, funk and R&B originals. However, there are also songs that have a swinging feel, hearkening back to the Full Swing days. Every tune on the record has a danceable groove, which will be welcomed by the community of dancers that have followed Sunshine's band up and down the east coast for the past few years. That *Deluxe* somehow succeeds in achieving such a cohesive sound is a credit not only to the producers, but also to the high caliber of musicianship throughout the record.

I caught up with Sunshine in his adopted home town of 22 years, New York City, shortly before the band was to debut much of the new material from *Deluxe* in an evening concert at Lincoln Center. It was an unusually comfortable evening in July, as I chatted with the nattily dressed crooner at a nice Parisian looking café on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The band had narrowly averted being rained out, and now the sky was clearing. I was curious about the mixture of styles on the new CD.

"I just write whatever comes out," says Sunshine. "Some days Craig [sax man and co-producer Craig Dreyer] and I will be writing together and a funky groove will pop out, or maybe we're riding in the van on the way to a gig, and we come up with a blues-type lyric with some altered changes. Who knows? Sometimes we start with a title. Some days I'm in the shower, maybe after a nice cup of coffee and a little medication, and a whole song presents itself to me. Like a gift. We don't plan it out. We just deal with what comes out."

What came out in this case was a motherlode of strong new originals. The opener, "Freeze on Me," is a bluesy boogaloo with Dan Hovey's crazed surf guitar dominating with Munsters-ish single note lines over a lyric that sounds like a cross between Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen. "You had the weasel in your pocket/and he'd do anything you said./He rode to heaven on his rocket/and landed on your water bed./ Ain't no room for three / You put the freeze on me." Indeed.

“Coffee and Reefer,” the second tune, has become an instant classic on the NYC club scene. “I can’t believe all the requests we get for that song,” says Sunshine. “We had only played it a few times, and it was like everybody knew about it.” The lyrics tread the fine line between silly and just plain hilarious, yet somehow Sunshine and Dreyer carry it off beautifully. Musically, it lopes along like an easy-swinging Louis Jordan tune, and ace trombonist Wycliffe Gordon (Wynton Marsalis, Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, etc.) provides a running commentary with his muted fills. Another highlight is a whistle solo by former cabaret star Dawn Hampton, who happens to be the sister of the legendary trombonist Slide Hampton, and is an icon on the New York swing dance scene.

The third tune, “Little Bit Shy,” comes blasting out of the box with a great horn arrangement set over a groove reminiscent of Motown classic “Cool Jerk.” The poor narrator is too shy to ask out the check out girl whom he has a crush on. Bass player Andy Hess (Black Crowes, Jon Scofield, Government Mule), who also played on Sunshine’s *Soul Drug* CD, really locks up with drummer Jason Pharr. A very uplifting experience, and proof that there is hope for shy guys everywhere.

Things turn ominous on the next tune, “Tumblin Down,” a tale of illicit affairs, arson, murder, mayhem and despair. Musically, the groove is carried along by Ben Stivers’ (Matchbox 20, the Bee Gees) left hand B3 organ bass line, and the horn backgrounds remind one of a classic Steely Dan cut. Great work by Dreyer, trumpeter Tim Ouimette, trombonist Nate Mayland, and baritone sax player Rick Kriska. “It’s an allegory,” is all Sunshine will tell me, when asked about the dark lyrics. “We are New Yorkers, and we were dealing with what happened in our back yard on September 11.” It is worth noting that the band performed regularly at Windows on the World atop the World Trade Center, and yearly at the summer concert series in the plaza, right up until it was destroyed. Could it be the towers that came tumbling down? Could the narrator be the United States, and Ten Finger Jack be a certain well known terrorist? That will have to be left open to the interpretation of the listener, since the songwriters will say no more.

Do you want to know how Sunshine and Dreyer *really* feel about the state of the world? Just listen to “Human Blues” and there will be no mystery. An alien comes to earth to give the humans a life lesson, but ends up on trial in an Ashcroft-esque military tribunal. The message, shouted in gang vocals over a super funky Meters-inspired groove, is clearly intended to urge the listener to make the most of their time on earth, to help one another, and to treat our planet with respect—as opposed to waging war. Then the alien speaks, in tandem with a wild guitar/harmonica line, which leads into a ripping Al Street guitar solo. Wycliffe Gordon also plays a beautiful solo against a harmony vocal background that would fit right in on a Marvin Gaye record before the lead vocals come back in, and are capped by the zinger “Who would Jesus bomb?” When questioned as to the vehemence of the anti-war message, Sunshine and Dreyer revealed that the lyrics to this song were written on the very day the US started bombing Baghdad, March 19, 2003.

“Still too Late” came about when Sunshine and Dreyer got together with jazzy songstress Madeleine Peyroux in a songwriting session to help her come up with some new material for her upcoming CD. While riding in the car on the way to Dreyer’s upstate New York hideaway, Sunshine tells me, he overheard Peyroux on the phone in the back seat. “She

was saying, ‘Oh yeah, I was supposed to send in that form six months ago. Is it still too late?’ I thought to myself, ‘Is it still too late? That makes no sense at all.’ And so we used that as the starting point for the song.” When you first hear it, the song brings to mind a lovelorn Ray Charles ballad, complete with gospel backing vocals in the style of the Raelettes. Rick Germanson’s piano solo is stellar. The quality of Sunshine’s voice is at its dusky best, alternately growling and curling into his trademark tender vibrato. Upon closer inspection, however, the lyrics are complete nonsense, and a riot. Take, for example, the line ‘I feel more like I do right now / than I did when I got here.’ “That’s the whole point,” laughs Sunshine. The way the song is performed, you would never know how funny it is, unless you really pay attention to the words. The kind of craftsmanship displayed in this song hasn’t been much in evidence in the world of popular music for several decades, in this writer’s opinion.

I ask about the next tune on *Deluxe*, a cover of the Lou Rawls hit “Natural Man,” and Sunshine tells me that it was suggested to him by the president of a well known record label. “While we were recording *Soul Drug*, around 1996, we were talking with a bunch of labels about record deals, and I was sitting in the office of the president of one of the labels having a meeting, when she put on this Lou Rawls CD, and said, ‘I could hear you doing a song like this.’ It was “Natural Man,” and it kind of blew my mind. Now I’m a huge Lou Rawls fan, whereas before I wasn’t all that familiar with his ‘60s recordings. We eventually started doing the tune, and a couple of years later we recorded it during a live radio show. But it wasn’t until last year, when I gave a copy to a DJ friend of mine, that it started to really catch on. Now I get emails from all over the world asking me which CD that song is on, how they can get a copy, will I burn them a copy...[breaks of into laughing fit]...Now we are finally putting it out. This version is from the *Straight Up* sessions. We just spiced it up with a horn section, and some new organ and vocal parts. I never signed the record deal, though. Good thing.” Check out drummer James Wormworth’s groove here. James is the former Full Swing drummer, who has played with just about everyone under the sun, and who can now be heard as part of the house band on *Late Night With Conan O’Brien* whenever Max Weinberg goes on tour with the E-Street Band.

‘Tore Up From the Floor Up?’ What is that all about? “It’s an expression that my wife’s aunt Wendy uses all the time, and I borrowed it for a song title. Actually, in the Carolinas it’s a pretty common expression that can mean many things. Drunk, hung over, etc.” What it means on *Deluxe*, however, is a rockin’ blues/gospel number with killer sax, piano and harmonica solos, and a great feel on the part of rhythm section stalwarts, Jason Pharr (drums) and Jim Greene (bass). At the end, in grand gospel fashion, the song goes into a foot stomping double time, with some great vocal adlibs and scorching Dan Hovey guitar leads. “It wrote it in ten minutes,” admits Sunshine. Sounds like that ten minutes took place around 1957, well before Ron was born.

Ron Sunshine was born in Denver, Colorado in 1963, and lived there until he emigrated to New York City in 1981 to attend Columbia University, where he graduated with a degree in English and History in 1985. While there he studied under Albert Murray, Kenneth Koch, Arnold Weinstein, Edward Said, Amiri Baraka, and others. But perhaps the biggest influence on his writing was his musical family. His father, now retired, played trumpet in big bands in the ‘40s, and his four older sisters performed as an a

capella vocal group in the early 60s. In his early youth, he was heavily impressed by the music at the All Nations Pentacostal Church of God in Christ, whose services he attended every Sunday with his live-in babysitter. “Just hearing that music brings me to tears. I still visit when I go back to Denver.”

One of the Singing Sunshine Sisters, JoAnne, wrote ‘Wasted,’ which is the next song on *Deluxe*. A loping New Orleans groove propelled by piano, organ, and upright bass gives way to a solo section over suspended chords, over which Craig Dreyer shines, and under which Jason Pharr turns in a Steve Gadd-like performance. The lyrics lament time wasted. Al Streets bluesy guitar fills caught my ear. “We were going for an open tuning sound, but the song was in G, and we didn’t have a capo, so we hooked up a big serving ladle to the neck of the guitar with some rubber bands, and *voila*, a unique new twangy sound was born. I love it. Al is a great guy, and very patient.” Not to mention a great guitarist.

‘Nobody But Me’ is a swinging small group rendering of the great Benny Carter-arranged Lou Rawls classic. Wycliffe Gordon soars, Matt Ray’s piano bubbles and stomps, while Sunshine tears it up on both his harmonica solo, and the lead vocal. Asked who his harmonica heroes are, the unassuming Sunshine lets on that he has always strived to make the instrument sound more like a horn, which makes perfect sense when you listen to his playing. But, I continue, these are some pretty jazzy changes for a diatonic instrument to negotiate. “I guess I’m good at faking it.” If that is truly the case, give the man an Oscar.

“We write a lot in the car,” says Sunshine of he and his partner in crime for almost ten years, Craig Dreyer. “We wrote ‘So In Love’ on the way from Atlantic City to New York one day. Dreyer recorded a slower, funkier version of the tune on his *You’ve Got a Fiend* CD a few years back. “But this is the original groove.” The groove of which he speaks, set in motion by an Al Street guitar riff that Marv Tarplin would gladly claim, interlocked with Doug Petty’s beautifully crunchy Fender-Rhodes sound, is pure butter. Special guest singer Paul Frazier (David Byrne, Rose Royce, Funky Poets) blends beautifully with Sunshine’s soulful lead and Dreyer’s deep throated background part. And check out the incendiary lead vocal fills at the end. This is a singer with a large range of styles, and utter believability.

Speaking of a range of styles, the final tune on *Deluxe* is a masterpiece of a soulful blues ballad. ‘Please Send Me Someone to Love,’ the Percy Mayfield classic, has been covered by everyone from Joe Williams to Sade. But never has it received a treatment like this. “Tim Ouimette, who is a great big band arranger, was after me to do a big string arrangement for this record.” [More of Ouimette’s work can be heard on Sunshine’s *Candy* CD]. “I wasn’t sure I could afford it, but he got me these amazing London Conservatory players, and cut me a great deal for the arrangement, so it was like, ‘Either I get this beautiful string arrangement, and don’t have a vacation for the next year or so...or live with my regrets on a tropical beach somewhere for six days. Luckily, my wife is very understanding.” Luckily for us, that is. What a beauty. Sunshine’s voice has never been smoother, and the arrangement features not just the string players, but brass underpinnings that would make Neal Hefti swell with pride. And there is a harmonica solo over a background of strings. And it sounds great. Quite an unexpected

pleasure, and a great closer. “We wanted to leave the listener with a message of peace and hope. I wanted to change the words to “Peace will enter when Bush is gone,” but I didn’t know how Percy Mayfield would have felt about taking liberties like that. Actually, he probably would’ve loved it.”

Well, if you couldn’t tell, I love *Deluxe*. A great batch of original songs, a few very tasty covers, and not a clinker to be found. Not a wasted note. The sound is rich and warm. It seems to grow on me with each listening.

(You can buy *Deluxe* online at www.cdbaby.com starting September 1, or by calling 1-800-BUY MY CD and asking for *Deluxe* by Ron Sunshine.)