







## **Dusted Reviews**



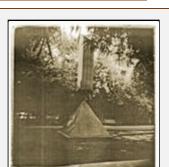
## **Dusted Reviews**

Artist: Susan Alcorn

Album: Curandera

Label: Fleece

Review date: Apr. 6, 2006



Susan Alcorn - Curandera

Right from the arresting opening notes of this album – long, vocal-like, arching swells played on pedal steel guitar – it is evident that the listener is in the presence of a musician whose work gets straight to the heart of tone, breath and vibration; a musician whose sometimes challenging experiments and investigations aspire to the deepest communions possible through sound-expression.

Texas-based Susan Alcorn is a virtuoso of the pedal steel guitar. She's also a composer and improviser with a unique musical vision that encompasses free-jazz, American country music, 20th century avant-garde composition, and much more.

On *Curandera*, Alcorn manifests a plethora of possibilities for solo pedal steel. Her extended techniques begin with and reach beyond the inherent slide-and-bend of the instrument, sometimes finding a vocabulary of scrapings, harmonics and pick-sounds, at other times seeking out timbres and techniques that might suggest a vocal choir, or the pealing chromaticism of orchestral harp.

Alcorn also honors and extends the rich and storied country music roots of the pedal steel guitar itself. On her version of the Billy Sherrill/George Richey-penned Tammy Wynette hit "You and Me,"

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<u>Grong Grong - To Hell</u> <u>N' Back</u>

<u>Human Skab - Thunder</u> <u>Hips and Saddle Bags</u> Alcorn takes the ballad through 12 modulations, all the while casting it in shifting harmonic and timbral settings that range from Nashville lonesome to jazz-ballad-lush to spiky and acerbic. What's remarkable is that she seems never to lose the emotional intensity that forges a link with the very essence of Wynette's vocal style. (Or, for that matter, of the country ballad tradition in general.)

Alcorn's transcription of Olivier Messiaen's 1937 motet "O Sacrum Convivium" reveals another facet of Alcorn's sound-world. Here the chromatic capabilities of the pedal steel serve the music perfectly. Each note within the moving-voice counterpoint is clean and well-articulated, yet finds its place within Messiaen's eerie yet beautifully prismatic and transcendence-seeking harmonic vision.

Alcorn's own gifts as composer-improviser are especially evident on "Broken Obelisk," a long piece that Alcorn wrote and recorded in the nocturnal aftermath of a silent peace vigil. (The vigil took place in the shadow of Barnett Newman's sculpture, *Broken Obelisk*.). Here, melody, harmony and pure sound are fused into what seems almost a catalog of painterly gestures. Each gesture, though, creates a sonic architecture: a space for the listener to move through. By the end of the 11-minute piece, the listener might feel as though he or she has walked through a series of rooms or structures, each revealing and transferring mysterious emotions in the way an abstract painting might.

That communion with – and communication of – emotion is the heart of Susan Alcorn's music. Though her sounds might range from bittersweet lovely to deep-bell resonant to stark and clangorous, there's always an allure. Most of all, there's a strong sense of mystery that asks the listener to return. And to listen again.

By Kevin Macneil Brown

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