

dusted



Dusted Reviews

Susan Alcorn - Curandera

today

features

reviews

charts

labels

writers

info

donate

Dusted Reviews



Artist: Susan Alcorn

Album: Curandera

Label: [Fleece](#)

Review date: Apr. 6, 2006

Search by Artist

Go

**Sign up here to
receive weekly
updates from Dusted**

email address

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 peeling 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,"

Subscribe

Recent Reviews

[Ellen Allien - Watergate
05](#)

[Balmorhea -
Constellations](#)

[Kevin Barker - You & Me](#)

[Blockhead - The Music
Scene](#)

[Guillermo E. Brown -
Shuffle Mode](#)

[Burning Star Core -
Papercuts Theater](#)

[Chicago Underground
Duo - Boca Negra](#)

[Moniek Darge - Soundies
\(Selected Work
1980-2001\)](#)

[Easter Monkeys -
Splendor of Sorrow](#)

[Field Music - Field Music
\(Measure\)](#)

[Josephine Foster -
Graphic as a Star](#)

[Freeway & Jake One -
The Stimulus Package](#)

[Grong Grong - To Hell
N' Back](#)

[Human Skab - Thunder
Hips and Saddle Bags](#)

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

Read More

➔ [View all articles by Kevin Macneil Brown](#)

➔ [Find out more about Fleece](#)



[Liars - Sisterworld](#)

[LoneLady - Nerve Up](#)

[loscil - Endless Falls](#)

[Martyn - Fabric 50](#)

[Joanna Newsom - Have
One On Me](#)

[Ewan Pearson - We are
Proud of Our Choices](#)

[Quasi - American Gong](#)

[Mary Roos - Amour
Toujours: French Song
Collection 1972-1975](#)

[Jack Rose - Luck in the
Valley](#)

[Anthony "Shake" Shakir -
Frictionalism 1994-2009](#)

[The Shout Out Louds -
Work](#)

[Six Organs Of
Admittance / Joseph
Mattson - Empty the Sun](#)

[Strange Boys - Be Brave](#)

[Tindersticks - Falling
Down a Mountain](#)

[Ali Farka Touré +
Toumani Diabaté - Ali
and Toumani](#)

[V/A - Black Man's Cry:
The Inspiration of Fela](#)

[V/A - Nigeria Afrobeat](#)

[Special: The New
Explosive Sound in 1970s
Nigeria](#)

[Wolf People - Tidings](#)

[Yellow Fever - Yellow
Fever](#)

©2002-2005 Dusted Magazine. All Rights Reserved.