

Susan Alcorn

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Profile

Susan Alcorn is a composer and musician who lives in Baltimore, MD

Training

1966-1967 Studied cornet with Ernest Pechin at Pechin's Music Store in Orlando, FLA

1977 Studied pedal steel guitar at Jeffran College

1982 Studied pedal steel guitar with Maurice Anderson

1994-1995 Studied Hindustani vocal music with Chandrakantha Courtney in Houston, TX

1991-96 Studied Deep Listening with Pauline Oliveros at Rose Mountain, New Mexico

2003 Studied Chilean folkloric music with Fernando Parra in Santiago, Chile

2004 Studied Argentinean folkloric music with Claudio Ciccoli in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Select Performances

1982-1997 Toured Texas playing pedal steel guitar with various country-western bands.

- 1999 First solo performance at the “12 Minutes Max” series, Diverse Works, Houston TX.
- 2000 “Solo, Duet and Ensemble Improvisations” Performance with Pauline Oliveros, Houston TX.
Performance with Eugene Chadbourne and the Ernest Tubb Memorial Band, Houston TX.
- 2001 Performed solo at the London Festival of Experimental Music, London UK.
- 2002 Performance with Chris Cutler Project at Jazztage, Leipzig, Germany.
- 2003 Led group performance of the Culture in Movement Quartet (benefit for the Plaza Victor Jara in Pudahuel, Santiago Chile), Houston TX.

Performance of “Four Meditations for Orchestra” by Pauline Oliveros, Austin TX, Houston TX.
- 2004 Solo performance Birmingham Improv Festival, Birmingham, AL.

Series of group performances at the High Zero Festival, Baltimore, MD.

Solo performance at the London Festival of Experimental Music, UK.

Solo performances Athens, GA and Nashville TN.
Duo performance with Joe Giardullo, CBGB’s, New York NY.
- 2005 Solo performance at Arsenic in Lausanne, Switzerland.
Group improvisation with Mike Cooper at Il Continiere in Rome, Italy.

Solo performances in New Orleans LA, Birmingham AL, Athens GA, Atlanta GA, Nashville TN, Baltimore MD, Philadelphia PA, New York NY.

- 2006 Performances at the Musique Action Festival in Vandouevre-les-Nancy, France with Eugene Chadbourne and Le Quan Ninh. Performance with the London Improvisors Orchestra, London UK.
Solo and ensemble performances in France, Sweden, and the UK
Performance of "Murder Ballads" with Dan Dutton, Louisville KY.
Texas tour of duets with saxophonist Joe McPhee.
- 2007 Performance with Jandek at the Rose Marine Theater, Fort Worth TX.
Performance with the ICI Ensemble at Himmelfahrtskirche in Munich, Germany.
Performance with Ellen Fullman and Theresa Wong at the Fort Worth Stockyards in Fort Worth TX.
- 2008 On the Outside Festival - Newcastle, UK
High Zero Festival - Baltimore. MD
- 2009 Glasgow Improvisors Orchestra Festival (Glasgow UK)
Trio performance with Fred Frith and Maggie Nicols in Houston, TX
Performance with Jandek at the Issue Project Room, Brooklyn, NY
Performance with Jandek at LOft Baltimore, MD
- 2010 Performances at the Glasgow Jazz Festival, Edinburgh, Hull, London, Porto, Lisbon, Geneva, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem
- 2011 Performance of *Indigo, a Blues Opera* at Michigan Women's Festival
- 2012 Residency at Issue Project Room Brooklyn
Featured performer at International Steel Guitar Convention St. Louis, MO
- 2013 High Zero Festival - Baltimore MD
Sonic Circuits Festival - Washington DC

Trio performance with Evan Parker and Michael Formanek in Baltimore

- 2014
- Release of *Mirage* trio album with Ellery Eskelin and Michael Formanek
- Trio performance with Josephine Foster at MoMa PS1, Long Island City, NY.
- Premiered Jeff Snyder' "Substratum" with the Mivos Quartet at Princeton Sound Kitchen.
- Duo performance with guitarist Mary Halvorson at the Vision Festival, NYC.
- Duo performance with Vinny Golia at I-Beam, Brooklyn, NY
- 2015
- Release of solo album *Soledad*
- Toured, with performances in Cleveland, Detroit, Louisville, Nashville TN, Chattanooga TN, Birmingham AL, Austin TX, and several cities in New Zealand.
- Premiered *Crepuscular Dreams* in Austin, TX, a work I composed for two pedal steel guitars and two trombones.
- Performed at the Under the Pavement Festival in Detroit.
- Performed at the NowHere festival in Philadelphia.
- Recorded *Away With You* with the Mary Halvorson Octet
- 2016
- Performed in St. Louis MO for the St. Louis New Music Circle.
- Toured with solo performances in Lexington KY, Louisville KY, Nashville TN, Chattanooga TN, Houston TX, Waltham MA, Turner Falls MA, Willimantic CT, and West Haven CT
- Toured Canada with solo performances in Hamilton, Kitchener, Toronto, and Montreal.
- Performed solo at the Fields Festival in northern MD.
- Performed with the Mary Halvorson Octet
- Performed at the Cropped Out Festival with saxophonist Joe McPhee.
- Performed with Luis Toto Alvarez at the Discount Music Gallery in NYC.
- 2017
- Performed at the NY Winter Jazzfest with the Mary Halvorson Octet.
- Performed solo at the Silent Barn in Brooklyn, NY

Recordings

2000 - *Uma* (Loveletter) - solo recording

2002 - European release of *Uma* (ulftone) - solo recording

2005 - *Curandera* (Fleece) - solo recording

2007 *And I Await the Resurrection of the Pedal Steel Guitar* (Olde English Spelling Bee) - solo recording

2005 - *Concentration* (Recorded) - solo record

2008 - *Curandera* (Majmua) - solo record

2009 - *Giving Out* (Mass Producers) - duo recording with Caroline Kraabel

2010 - *A&B* (Iorram) - duo recording with George Burt

2012 - *Visible Breath* (Ideologic Organ) with Eyvind Kang

2013 - *Mirage* - trio recording with Ellery Eskelin and Michael Formanek (Clean Feed)

2015 - *Soledad* (Relative Pitch) - solo recording

2016 - *Evening Tales* (Mystra) - solo recording

2016 - *Away With You* (Firehouse 12) - octet recording with the Mary Halvorson Octet

Interviews and Features

2008 "Learning to Listen", *Baltimore City Paper*, "by Bret McCabe

2009 "The Hovering Angel of Susan Alcorn's Guitar", *Arthur*, "by Ian Nagoski

- 2010 “Awaiting the Resurrection of the Pedal Steel Guitar: Susan Alcorn”, *Quietus*, by Spencer Grady
- 2014 “Susan Alcorn 13 Questions”, *PreparedGuitar Blogspot*, by Miguel Copon
- 2015 “One To Tango: Susan Alcorn brings her pedal steel guitar to Argentinian tango”, *Baltimore City Paper*, by Lee Gardner
- 2015 “Our Lady of the Perpetually Moving Pedals: An Interview with Susan Alcorn”, *The Pantograph Punch*, by Hermione Johnson
- 2017 “Interview with Susan Alcorn”, Neu Guitars Blog, by Andrea Aguzzi

Awards

- 1961 Spelling bee “champion”, *Muhlenburgh Elementary School*
- 2008 “Best Solo Artist”, Best of Baltimore *Baltimore City Paper*
- 2016 “Best musician: other instrument”, *International Jazz Critics Poll*

Music journalism

- 2005 “Texas, Three Days and Two Nights: the Road, the Radio, and the Full Moon” for *Resonance Magazine* (UK), republished by *CounterPunch.org*, republished in “Best Music Writing of 2006” by *De Capo Press*

Reviews

"Susan A is a great player who has mastered and redefined an unlikely instrument. With an exquisite touch she invoked it's history, extended its emotional and ethereal strengths and explored its microtonal possibilities, drawing it out of the contexts that traditionally render it invisible, or generic,

and into its own mature discourse, reminding improvisers that 'free' includes the right to be romantic, melodic and four to the bar."

Chris Cutler, The Wire (UK)

"From the relatively unadorned sound of pedal steel and amplifier, Susan Alcorn brings forth music that is as full of emotional honesty as it is of melodic and harmonic exploration and surprise. She possesses a virtuosic technique that is always at the service of the musical moment and its possibilities for expression and communication."

Kevin McNeil Brown, Dusted Features

"Alcorn's pedal steel tones, stretch, float, and dance in the air, and on the ears, expressing something that's worlds beyond words, yet able to communicate on the deepest level."

Pete Gershon, Signal to Noise

"Alcorn is a rare musician who embraces the full spectrum of expressive possibilities for an instrument to communicate a full human experience instead of a restricted aesthetic paradigm. She's a maverick and her solo recordings are destined to become classics that we turn to year after year for relief from common music."

Michael Anton Parker, Downtown Music Gallery

"With clarity and precision and a gift for invoking sweeping landscapes, Alcorn is able to perform arrangements of Curtis Mayfield or Olivier Messiaen highlighting both their structural and spiritual aspects simultaneously and then attacking the strings zen-slap-loud or hovering stained-glass mobiles of sound-clouds."

Ian Nagoski, Arthur

"Alcorn charms a complex, expressive, and intimately responsive vocabulary out of her instrument, enabling her to compliment noisy, ceiling-climbing swells or barely audible quiets."

Bret McCabe, Baltimore City Paper

Employing pedal steel in an experimental-music context might sound like a gimmick, but a performance by Susan Alcorn will easily silence skeptics. Alcorn's improvisations use the instrument's uniquely liquid sound to gorgeously poetic effect.

Time Out New York

"Her radical deep listening & approach to the steel guitar . . . is a revelation."

Ed Baxter, London Musicians Collective

Album Reviews

Soledad

"Astor Piazzolla's eccentricity as a composer is overshadowed by his reputation as one of the foremost exponents of tango music. The ostensible genre designation tends to mask his poignant and peculiar mixture of forlorn sentimentalism, tense dissonances, and covert use of noise. Susan Alcorn, herself an expert in oblique lyricism, understands this very well. Her translation of Piazzolla's compositions into the warm drawl of her pedal steel guitar on four of the five cuts on her CD *Soledad* brings this into sharp focus, while insinuating her own imagination into the equation.

The album opens with a drowsy yet assiduous take on the title piece—slowed to the point of the mere suggestion of a dance—and continues to unfold in a similarly dreamlike, nocturnal manner. In more typical readings of Piazzolla's work—even the slow stuff—its chromatic snakings tend to be imbued with a nervous agility, but here one is really able to appreciate each distinct melodic turn and the way it sits against the varying degrees of harmonic opacity.

With each successive track, Alcorn's enviable command of her unwieldy instrument is more and more revealed, but one never gets the impression of excessive displays of virtuosity or that she's fighting the instrument's innate resonant legato. Rather, the increasing number of surprising colours that emerge—gong-like chordal swells, brittle music-box-like figures, nimble contrapuntal dances and swooping glissandi—are blended progressively into a single cohesive palette of sound.

Her one original composition on the album, "Suite for Ahl" (the only track that's not a solo), fits in remarkably well, with opening nods vaguely in Piazzolla's direction. Bassist Michael Formanek frequently anchors the low end, freeing Alcorn to produce wild ripples of texture and fluid high sweeps, while he also contributes bold gales of bowed tremolo and cleanly plucked melodies. *Soledad* serves equally well both as an introverted homage to Piazzolla and as an introduction to Alcorn's own euphoniously

exploratory artistry.”

MusicWorks

“The adjective that repeatedly comes to mind is 'otherworldly'. Baltimore's Susan Alcorn has a concept and approach to the pedal steel guitar that rips the instrument out of its typical role and casts it in a whole new light. On *Soledad* she takes it one step further as she arranges the work of the Argentinian composer and accordionist Astor Piazzolla, who was renowned for his compositions that combined tango, jazz and classical.

Alcorn draws an expansive set of sounds from her instrument - from comfortable country glissandos to Theremin like science fiction noir effects. The shimmering earnestness of the instrument is used to full effect in her arrangements that probe the depths and textures of the songs. The stately title track begins with her guitar sounding much like an organ. The melody, delivered in a slow, dark, and deliberate manner grabs and tugs at the heart. The following 'Invierno Porteno' also begins enshrouded by dark clouds but they soon part to the rhythms of the tango. Throughout the recording we hear Alcorn deconstructing, examining, and then reprising the songs, unhurried and always mindful of the original melody. Bassist Michael Formanek joins on Alcorn's composition "Suite for Ahl". Switching between plucking and bowing, his playing adds a weight to the guitars more ephemeral abstractions.

For something completely new and challenging, but still accessible, and again, otherworldly beautiful, give *Soledad* a listen. I hope we will be hearing more from Alcorn soon.”

The Free Jazz Collective

“On *Soledad*, Susan Alcorn continues to dramatically extend the boundaries associated with the pedal steel guitar, with this time the Baltimore, Maryland- based musician performing solo renditions of Astor Piazzollo's 'Nuevo Tango.' Needless to say, the sound world presented on the recording is far removed from traditional Country & Western; if anything, Alcorn's playing has more in common with jazz guitar than any style originating out of Nashville. Alcorn's an innovator, yes, but a quietly subversive one, someone who effects change surreptitiously rather than confrontationally.

Having been profoundly influenced by figures such as John Coltrane, Edgar Varese, Muddy Waters, Buddy Emmons, Pauline Oliveros, and

Olivier Messiaen, Alcorn in like spirit draws from multiple genres in her music, among them free jazz, avant-garde classical music, and Indian ragas. Her preferred format is solo performance, not because she doesn't enjoy playing with others but because the intimacy gained from playing alone proves so rewarding. The intimacy level is high on Soledad, as Alcorn plays four of the five settings by herself.

In Alcorn's hands, "Adiós Nonino," written by Piazzolla in October 1959 after his father's death, is suitably elegiac yet hardly one-dimensional. She alternates between ponderous and explorative passages, and the playful guitar-like theme that arrives halfway through invigorates the music with a jolt of energy. Piazzolla drew inspiration from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* for his own *Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas* (*The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*), of which "Invierno Porteño" (Winter in Buenos Aires) is the second part. One of the composer's most beautiful settings, it's treated to a heartfelt reading by Alcorn that honours the original, and much the same might be said of her version of "Soledad" (Solitude), which smartly concentrates on distilling the dreamlike splendour of the haunting original arrangement into one for a single instrument.

Michael Formanek's contrabass playing (plucked and bowed) makes for a pleasing addition to "Suite for AHL," Alcorn's sole original on the recording; if anything, his presence catalyzes her to play more freely, or perhaps it's simply that in tackling her own material she feels less beholden to follow Piazzolla's script. That said, the seventeen-minute running time of "Tristezas de un Doble A" allows her to stretch out more than she might on a piece half its length.

The impression left by Soledad is of someone thinking on her feet, open to where the music might take her at any moment, and a sense of real-time creation is present throughout. Alcorn hews closely enough to the basic structures of Piazzolla's compositions that they clearly identify themselves as such (she even replicates the customary flourish with which many of his pieces end), yet she also grazes freely, careful to let her own sensibility work its way into the performances, too. Her approach is, in other words, respectful but not overly rever-

entia; there's soloing—in one sense there's nothing but—but it's soloing done in service to the song. In Alcorn's own words, she enjoys 'listening to and playing all music and any music in which I can feel a sense of heart, sincerity, and purpose'—qualities present in ample supply on this

homage.”
Textura.org

Touch This Moment

With her latest solo album, composer/improviser/pedal steel guitarist Susan Alcorn continues her expansive musical journey, this time manifesting a new range of tonal colors, along with an ever-deepening sense of proportion and openness, of event and silence.

To most steel players, tone and touch are the heart of sound; touch is what sets the tone in motion, influencing its energy, shape and texture, its emotional and expressive vibration. Given this, *Touch This Moment* is a wonderfully appropriate title for this recording. Alcorn has long been a player who inhabits each note and gesture with a powerful intimacy. Here, she seems to have reached an even deeper communion with the range of timbres and textures she can bring from the pedal steel guitar.

The first track, *Little Bird, You Can Fly*, at 23 minutes, provides plenty of evidence. Over an opening percussive, metallic pulse, Alcorn plays long, breathing and rolling tones, commencing the sense of dialogue between elements that runs through the piece. As the music shifts and changes organically, exploring a variety of timbres and textures, of structural densities and openness of form, it does seem to become a questing journey. (Alcorn's accompanying liner note poem evokes the epic migration of a monarch butterfly, and the desire to Listen/ Feel/Find the little voice.)

Indeed, throughout the album there is an enthralling vocal quality to many of the melody lines, both in phrasing and timbre. And where Alcorn's previous album, *And I Await The Resurrection of the Pedal Steel Guitar*, tended toward dark shadows, this one seems to let more light in. For certain, there are dissonant passages to be found, along with rolling, rumbling low-end slides (This is most prevalent on the almost-orchestral *Agnes Martin/Specchio Nero*.) But then there are those song-like lines sometimes with a mysterious transparency of voicing in the chords and harmonic clusters to open things up. *Hovensweep* is sculptural in its use of those chords and clusters; reminiscent, perhaps, of Messiaen in the way it seems to conjure actual objects in a spatial landscape made of sound and silence.

Even when evoking a tough and violent urban cityscape (Gilmor Blue), Alcorn balances complex harmonic and scalar motion with elegantly aching, songlike melody. The resulting piece carries some of the blues- and -gospel-soaked gravity of an Ellington tone poem, the heart-rending immediacy of a Mingus ballad.

For the final track, Postlude, Alcorn offers a quiet and intimate steel guitar meditation: her own journey through the shapes and cycles of a Bach Prelude. Resonating, ringing, rippling, it's a serene celebration of musical mystery, of the pedal steel and its infinite allure.

Dusted Reviews

An organ-like hum begins to fluctuate in timbre and intensity, snowballing into a buzzing morass. Just more than a minute and a half into this anxious squall it fades to near silence, before a gentler sound begins. It's less restless and more specific, with a faint flesh-on-metal friction vibration cutting through the back-ground before another gentle fade to silence. This rest is ruptured by a quick succession of plaintive notes, some of which are gently bent into pinched tones which briskly fade to an aural black that gets disturbed by a ghost of a melodic line. Through gentle volume controls, this melody blooms into a swirling sound. And through the entire run of this 6-minute-and-43-second piece of music, it starts and stops at regular intervals, picking up and varying motifs and textures, sounds and moods, until its composer/performer, pedal-steel guitarist Susan Alcorn, has delivered a stark musical homage to the abstract expressionist name checked in its title: Agnes Martin/Specchio Nero.

A non-idiomatic painter may be the best analog to Alcorn's supple musical ideas. Her new, self-released *Touch This Moment* her fifth solo outing showcases a performer that continues to display a virtuosic command of her instruments possibilities. Bluesy lines become Messiaen-like intensity in Gilmor Blue, while she provides her own piano-like rhythmic accompaniment to a melodic line in Hovenweep.

What's not so much new as an improv ensemble member, Alcorn proves again and again that few ideas escape her sensitive ear as different from her compositional pen is *Touch's* tenderness. While she does wander down a few of the murky paths she trod on 2007's *And I Await the Resurrection of the Pedal Steel Guitar*, Alcorn offers a much broader palette here, as capable of something pretty (Postlude) as something pastoral (Hovenweep). And with the 23-minute lead-off Little Bird, We Can Fly,

Alcorn delivers something bordering the euphoric, moving from the intimate to the sweeping with the scope and ambition of a symphonic work all powered by an orchestra of one.

Bret McCabe Baltimore City Paper

And I Await The Resurrection of the Pedal Steel Guitar

"This LP-only release is Susan Alcorn's deepest, most adventurous --and some- times darkest-- work to date. Beginning with a steel guitar reading of the Buddhist "Heart Sutra" that sends out sonic ripples like stones dropped into the void, it moves on to conjure moods and possibilities way beyond what most music even attempts. Among the stunning pieces here is a two-part tone-poem dedicated to the visionary big-band arranger Bob Graettinger that, while utterly engaging in and of itself, manages also to find a transformative place where Stan Kenton's elegant cool and Sun Ra's dangerous "Magic City" might inter- sect. As usual, Alcorn sings with the voice of the pedal steel, conveying a bold and resonant vision of spirit and compassion."

Dusted Reviews

The album title is a homage to Olivier Messiaen's *Et Exspecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum*, which pedal steel guitarist Susan Alcorn first heard while driving to a Country & Western gig in her home town Houston, Texas. The impact of the experience was such she had to pull off the road, which is just as well - hard to imagine persuading a Texas traffic cop to waive charges of dangerous driving by trying to pin the blame on the nefarious influence of late 20th century European contemporary music, isn't it? Of course, there's no way a humble pedal steel guitar can hope to compete with the crashing apocalyptic ending of the Frenchman's piece, but harmonically and timbrally the title track does indeed manage to evoke something of the foreboding of the original. Even the opening "Heart Sutra", with its delicate play on upper harmonics of a single repeated pitch, is a sober affair. Susan Alcorn might be best known to improv fans for her guest appearances in some of Eugene Chadbourne's Country-inspired projects, but we're some considerable way away from the good Doctor's high jinx here; as Alcorn's declared mission is to extricate the mighty instrument from the C&W universe with which it's invariably associated (a bit like Jozef van Wissem has done for the lute and Matthew Welch has for bagpipes, I guess), you can bet your bottom dollar there ain't no country licks on offer. Instead, a remarkably sensitive investigation of microtonal inflections and timbre easily on a par with vintage Loren Connors or the more introspective

solo offerings of Tetuzi Akiyama . . . A real treasure, go dig it up.

Dan Warburton Paris Transatlantic

FWIW, the album I chose as number 1 for Wire was Susan Alcorn's *And I Await The Resurrection Of The Pedal Steel Guitar* on Olde English Spelling Bee.

Dan Warburton Bagatellan

Curandera

On her solo effort, *Curandera*, Alcorn makes the unorthodox seem conventional. Of Alcorn's own compositions here, the music is inspired by a range of interests: Chilean natives, visual art, Southern literature, and metaphysics. The accompanying tracks are interpretations of songs by no less varied a group than Messiaen, Curtis Mayfield and Tammy Wynette. Across the album, Alcorn's playing shows virtuoso discipline and craftsmanship. Her dexterity in picking calls to mind Joe Morris and Derek Bailey, while frequently settling into the loose, sustained cries and decayed whines characteristic of the instrument. For most of the album, only the lightest touch of reverb is used to enhance the pedal steels tone. The music is otherwise unadulterated, benefitting primarily from Alcorn's rich, deep sustains, in keeping with the records theme: a perpetual longing for things unreachable. On Broken Obelisk composed out of necessity after Alcorn attended a peace vigil at the Rothko Chapel, she explores the central octaves of the guitar in a slow, contemplative tempo; dissonance is married with conventional slides to bring a unity between the instruments naturally opposing attributes. The tunes disinterested resolution reminds that dilemmas are often conceded and then forgotten, here taking form in the long decay of a single tone. Alcorn's record seems borne from personal philosophies, those which are important enough to share, but might lose weight in their expansion. A really beautiful recording."

Bagatellan

"Pedal steel guitar player Susan Alcorn describes the title track of *Curandera* as a song based on the music of the Mapuche people of Chile. This beautiful solo CD also includes versions of Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready", Tammy Wynette's hit "You and Me", and Olivier Messiaen's choral work "O Sacrum Convivium". As that list indicates, Alcorn sings atop the glistening metallic glide and swell of her instrument. As it also suggests, she places no boundaries around the pedal steels expressive potential. Her musical awareness is broad and refined, extending from the heart of

Country and Western Swing through the language of the high modernist avant garde to the communicative urgency of free jazz. The less vocal aspects of her improvising often recall Fred Frith's tabletop guitar soundings - harmonically expansive, tinged with ghostly overtones or vividly metallic. In more vocal moments, especially on "Curandera", you could be listening to Meredith Monk or Joan La Barbara, not just in terms of tone and timbre but in the pacing and the breath that seems to flow so naturally through Alcorn's playing. Pedal steel guitar can sound glacial, in Alcorn's hands its got soul."

Julian Cowley, The Wire

"Pedal steel guitar. It's one of the great miracles of human ingenuity--rich, sustained tones that cut through the air and breathe with complete microtonal freedom! A perfect candidate for creative, experimental music, but how many albums have you heard where someone actually takes this boggling potential and puts it into reality? Wouldn't it be nice if some virtuoso of the instrument steeped in its traditions and inspired equally by avant-garde music would develop a personal aesthetic welcoming both sublime melody and edgy abstraction, create a body of solo work and openly explore experimental improvisation with others? Heck, if there was a musician like that they'd be famous and we'd all soak up every last recording we could get our hands on! Her name is Susan Alcorn. She lives in Texas. She's been working on her steel guitar music for thirty years. The recordings are here. They are treasures. Curandera is her follow-up to her widely praised solo debut Uma and pursues a similar synthesis of heart-aching traditional beauty and sound adventures. Rather than the typical avant-garde path of rejecting melody and focusing on harsh, difficult new sound vocabularies, Alcorn has dug so deep inside her melodies that she's opened up a new space of details in individual note shapes, creating decays that don't decay or suddenly become attacks instead, and patiently revealing subtle shifts in overtones. Alcorn's music is a hall of mirrors flooded with liquid gold shimmering off her horizontal fretboard. Each composition on Curandera tells its own story, and three of them radically re-tell someone else's story. Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready" is transformed into a sweet meditation that strips away any distractions from the sublime core melody. Oliver Messiaen's choral work "Sacrum Convivium" is rendered with stunning precision as a simultaneous celebration of Messiaen's harmonies and the special timbres of pedal steel guitar. Tammy Wynette's "You and Me" becomes a melodic labyrinth with gorgeous hints of the twangy music that serves Alcorn as both deep roots

and an entrenched aesthetic identity for pedal steel guitar that she typically seeks radical divergences from.

Possibly my favorite, Alcorn's title composition is a sparse, brooding sequence of microtonal nosedives based on the Mapuche music of Chile and inspired by the struggles of this indigenous culture to retain their autonomy. Alcorn composed "Twin Beams" for a 2002 project with Chris Cutler in Leipzig, based on a poem Cutler wrote in response to 9/11; the music invokes the full range of emotions appropriate to the topic, from madness to serenity, with judicious use of violent, jarring steel guitar gestures that might not be suitable for new age audiences. "Broken Obelisk" is another piece where she balances abstract extended techniques with contemplative prettiness. Quite generally, Alcorn is a rare musician who embraces the full spectrum of expressive possibilities for an instrument to communicate a full human experience instead of a restricted aesthetic paradigm. She's a maverick and her solo recordings are destined to become classics that we turn to year after year for relief from common music."

Michael Anton Parker, Downtown Music Gallery

Uma

"*Uma* (Loveletter 010) Solo pedal steel guitar with a bit of trombone provided by David Dove. Susan Alcorn is a marvelous pedal steel player from Texas that Eugene Chadbourne has worked with and has been raving about for a while now. Susan and her band back Eugene on his forthcoming Boxholder release, and it is just incredible! *Uma* is mainly a solo pedal steel effort which is sublime, moody, lovely, melancholy and often haunting. Susan wrote most of the tunes, but also does a Thelonious Monk medley and ends with a transcendent version of 'Amazing Grace' (yo Raymon!)"

Bruce Gallanter, Downtown Music Gallery

"Alcorn's playing and technique here and elsewhere is amongst the best I've ever heard, but more importantly this is instrumental music that you can actually feel moving in a never-ending loop between your mind and your heart."

Broken Face

"East meets country and western, and a whole lot more, on this Houston pedal steel guitarist's debut solo album. As a member of Eugene

Chadbourne's Ernest Tubb Memorial Band, Alcorn plays little that's recognizable as country or alt-country. The eight improvisational instrumentals on *Uma* pursue that exploratory spirit without sounding much like Chadbourne either. Instead, Alcorn draws on droning Indian ragas for "Uma's River Song of Love" and "The Royal Road/ Shambhala." "Dancing" skips along on a series of hypnotic, repetitive phrases, and the funereal "Kalimankou Denkou/ Thrace" progresses through sweet sitar-like whines, lilting passages, and harplike phrasing. "Monk Medley" opens bluesy ("Crepuscle for Nellie"), turns hard-bop ("Pannonica"), and soars out ("Groovin' High") before the album closes with a tantalizing snatch of "Amazing Grace." Alcorn doesn't ignore the melancholy mood that her instrument brings to country but applies elements of world music, jazz, avant-classical, and New Age to create sounds that defy classification."

Texas Monthly