



ANN SWEETEN
a place in the sun
Orange Band Records (2005)

This is pianist and keyboard player Ann Sweeten's sixth release and her winning streak remains intact as *a place in the sun* is yet another quality offering from this artist. What makes the recording especially noteworthy, though, is the amount of personal hardship Sweeten endured seeing it come to completion, namely her struggle to overcome breast cancer (she is currently a survivor) and the loss of her two beloved dogs, Niko and Jessie. Being a dog lover myself, I can't begin to imagine the inner strength that was required to return to making music after losing such dear animal companions, so kudos to Ann for her heroism and perseverance in facing these ordeals and for her triumphs over her disease and her sorrow. It's now time to address the recording itself.

While the overall musical motifs present on *a place in the sun* closely adhere to previous releases from the artist (e.g. *Reflections*, *Passage* and her most recent offering, *Sapphire Days*), new on this album is the addition of an accompanist, the talented flutist Trisha Craig, who plays with Sweeten on four tracks. Of these, my favorite is the relatively jaunty "Winding Roads." However, even on this song, the mood is still somewhat reflective, albeit nowhere near as somber as, for example, the opening "Shepherd Me" with its soft rolling piano melody and Sweeten's now characteristic lush synth strings. The title track is likewise low-key and more in a melancholic vein, although the synth strings (played on a Kurzweil 2500XS) add enough drama that the song is never morose or moribund, but instead is touching and gently sad. "Castles in the Air" is another selection on which Craig sits in on flute, and in this instance she reminds me a bit of Tim Wheeler and the work he did with Michael Hoppé on albums such as *The Yearning*. I love the opening synths on "Echoes" which have a cinematic quality. The song feels intimate and incredibly sad at times, but Sweeten's assured way on the piano also contains an element of hope and resolve as well.

If you either own or have heard some of Ann Sweeten's previous releases, you will have a good idea of what to expect on *a place in the sun*, except for the tracks which feature Craig's flute playing. This is not to say that this album is unnecessary or redundant, because nothing could be further from the truth in the regard that it must have been an incredibly cathartic experience for Ann to record and release this CD. It's also a worthwhile purchase for the music lover/fan because, to my ears at least, Sweeten has never sounded better. Her use of synths is solid, as always, but it's her piano playing that strikes me as being particularly sincere and heartfelt on this album. It's almost painfully revealing at times. The liner notes are required reading as they are highly personal and a testament to the tears that went into making this fine recording. My hat is off to Ann Sweeten not just for her wonderful music but also for her personal strength in the face of soul-crushing adversity. The world can use more people like this woman.

Bill Binkelman, Producer and Host, *Wind and Wire*, KFAI-FM, Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN

MIXED MEDIA 20 Lockmere Road Cranston RI 02910 401.942.8025