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Safire Sun album a bridge to the top

Humor me for a moment. I want to start this music review with a couple of thoughts about construction.

Think about bridge building: You can't build a great bridge with solid pieces of pure metal. Cast iron is too brittle, aluminum is too soft. That's why builders use alloys like steel, which is a combination of different metals. And stronger than solid steel are cables made of wound-up layers of different pieces of steel wire. Such cables can support bridges over a mile long.

Music can be like that, too. Consider the case of the Knox County band Safire Sun, which has just released its self-titled debut album. The strength of the band is in its diversity, including original country, pop, bluegrass, ballad and gospel songs. All of these different strands combine to build a bridge of imagination to a new level, reflecting not just one genre, but the whole great melting-pot of American music.

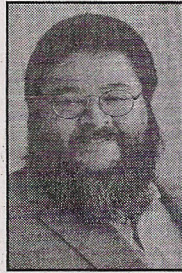
The mastermind behind the band is the talented multi-instrumentalist Darell Sanson, whose list of professional experience is as long as my arm. But he is rivaled in experience by his song-writing daughter Yvonne Sanson, who is writer or co-writer on eight of the album's 11 tracks. Her flexible Nashville and Muscle Shoals-savvy background provides the framework, the powerful body of the band.

The heart of the band comes through in the angelic sweetness of Allie Dible's singing, both lead and harmony. Dible adds dimensions by contributing to the song-writing as well.

The album starts with the easy, assured amble of "Swing Me," with Yvonne Sanson offering a sweet but tough vocal supported by perfectly focused harmony vocals from Darell Sanson and Dible. The occasional off-beat accents are typical of the quiet surprises this album delivers left and right.

"The Cowboy" is another

Mark S. Jordan



Yvonne song, but it offers maximum contrast, rattling down the tracks like a fast train under a brooding sky, driven by Brittney Green-Sanson's rock-solid bass line. Darell's fast mandolin picking flashes like lightning against this background and Dible's wordless voice rings out in the far distance over Yvonne's understated but intense story of rejected love and its aftermath.

This strikes me as one of the best hybrid country-bluegrass songs I've heard in years. Song, production and recording combine for an astonishingly assured track. Make no mistake, this isn't some casual, sloppy garage band. This is state-of-the-art music making to rival anything in Nashville ... or beyond.

Third is the song "Holly," which is again penned by Yvonne. Dible, however, takes the lead vocal here. Her voice is like liquid silver, and she has an uncanny knack for hitting pitches with laser-like precision, never slipping out of tune. Yet there is nothing mechanical about her facility. Her voice is reminiscent of Alison Krauss, and like Krauss she combines accuracy with warmth.

Dare I also add that sometimes I find myself preferring Dible's voice to Krauss'? The truth is, Dible has greater control over her vocal vibrato, while offering just as creamy a voice, with a jaw-dropping accuracy of pitch.

"Devil's Fire" is a loping, quietly sinister song co-written by Yvonne. In the closing section of the song, the harmony vocals bloom and expand, interweaving with the main melody to bring

the song to a memorable close. Darell Sanson and Dible share songwriting duties on "You're All That I Need," a tender Gospel song. Singing lead again, Dible bumbles out vocal runs and trills as if it's the easiest thing in the world. The truth is, as any singer will testify, such decorative runs are among the most difficult things to perform.

Buoyant bluegrass style returns with another Yvonne song, "Cowgirl's Dream," with its refrain, "I'm lookin' for a man who can live a cowgirl's dream." Indeed, her lyrics are full of both world-weary wisdom and unstoppable spirit: "Well, I'm good at taking chances, 'cause it's the only way I learn. If you're going to play with fire, sometimes it's got to burn." Again, the band is tight and the harmonies are right on the mark.

Yvonne Sanson also wrote the plaintive and tender "One of These Days," where she reveals that her voice can expand to a richer, fuller sound. Not only is this song a fantastic country song, it's the kind of thing that could make an impact in the pop market, too. The perfect craft of the songwriting, combined with Yvonne's vulnerable vocal, is mightily impressive. This band is going to be going places.

Dible shows a new side on the next track, the feisty "One of These Days," which has to be one of the sassiest Gospel songs I've ever heard. Written by Darell and his wife, Nancy, the song irresistibly combines intricate harmonies with blues-influenced melody. Dible puts a more cutting edge on her lovely voice to give the song the right kick, and Marty Townsend's banjo gives it a mischievous sense of adventure. It's fun to imagine how this would fire up the audience in a live show.

But Dible has one more trick up her sleeve, with the drop-dead gorgeous "Love You Anyway," an expansive, expressive singer-songwriter style piece written by Dible herself. Her sil-

very voice expands to carry emotional weight with grace. I would defy anyone to listen to this song and "The Way You Make Me Feel" and not be swept away.

Eight-year-old guitarist Ethan Whitehair is given a chance to step forward and shine in "The Little Man," penned for him by Yvonne. Darell has worked with Ethan, his nephew, ever since he was little (not that he isn't still little!) to work on music, so that the young man, who suffers from Goldenhar Syndrome, will someday have a trade that won't be hurt by his vision impairment. The little man throws himself into the song endearingly. His enjoyment will no doubt make the song bring the house down in live shows, particularly when he closes the song, saying, "That's sweet, man!"

The album closes with "Look What Love Became," another song by Yvonne, but with yet another surprise: A guest lead vocal by Mahisha Sanson, another Sanson daughter, who combines the family's musical skill with a voice that is alluringly dark in shading, suiting the melancholy narrative of faded love.

In short, the variety of this album and the people performing it makes it astonishingly strong. Instead of one or two good songs with filler in-between, Safire Sun delivers great song after great song, the kind of songs that are impressive on first hearing and only get more so, the more you live with them. The recording, by Celeste Friedman at Bluefish Recording Tank in Newark, is very good, offering strength, depth and clarity, which sets off this impressive collection of songs handsomely. I wouldn't be surprised one bit if this album serves as a bridge to national success for Safire Sun.

To get your own copy of the disc (and you should), visit the group's MySpace page or its Web site at www.safiresun.com, or call Darell Sanson at 694-3477.