



By Scott Thomas - GJD Contributor

Smoothie Award winning jazz guitarist Vernon Neilly's new CD - featuring the Legendary Hit Maker Stevie Wonder's music - is chocked full of Wonder's hit songs and has got to be one of the best Tribute CDs I've heard in a long while. The album reeks of Pure Class. Vernon has out done himself with the arrangements, recording, and engineering of this sweet music. The record label owner and producer has taken those celebrated hits and has made them flawlessly and collectively all his own.

I remember it was still winter in Upstate New York and we had just had a late winter snow storm (March '77). The snow was 4 foot deep everywhere... no kiddin'! After ol' man winter hit again, the only way to get around for a few days was with a snow mobile. And talk about freakin' cold!!! However, as soon as the roads were drivable, my uncle (who was only a few years older than me) drove up from Norfolk, Virginia Naval Base for the weekend to take care of family business (he was a young sailor in the navy at the time).. While he was there on furlough, he asked me if I wanted to go to back with him to Norfolk for a couple of weeks and it was just in time for my two week spring break from school. I was 15 at the time and he was 18... You betcha. To my amazement, my mother said GO! He had to come back to New York to finish his family business in a couple of weeks anyway.

The CD is Vernon's fourth on his Boosweet Records. The diversity the album gives ranges from Jazz, Fusion, Pop to Rock. Having Greg Howe and Kiko Loureiro (progressive guitarists) on board has definitely set the bar for the other musicians involved. Other instrumentalists featured on the album with Neilly include U-Nam, Juan Nelson, Michael Paulo and Miguel Mega (Brazilian guitarist) and they also don't hesitate to also step out into the lime light to bring us some serious tunes.

So... here I leave the cold blistering North Country and 12 hours later (we drove) I was in balmy Norfolk Virginia, 72 degrees at nite, 85 and breezy during the day, everything blooming and swimming in the ocean! I would go to the beach during the day while my uncle was at work on the aircraft carrier the USS Forrestal. I'd take my l'il radio to the beach and lay out all day drinkin' Big Red, eatin' Moon Pies, and livin' the GOOD LIFE! "Susie by the Sea Shore, Selling Sea Shells... Yeah Baby!!! Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney, Elton John, were playing on the airwaves and man I was in heaven. The smell of coconut oil...the jamz, chicks on the sand...

damn!!! On the board walk there were pay phones and I would call my family while looking at the waves splashing upon the beach all the while teasing my younger brothers about the warm weather and the beautiful girls walking by while they were freezing their butts off in upstate New York.

From this new breed of illustrious artist you will hear a lot of Stevie's favorite hits: Stevie Wonder's "Boogie on Reggae Woman" recorded twice as Rock and Urban/Pop; "I Wish," which has a Jazz-Fusion sound. What you don't hear in these songs is musicians stepping all over themselves trying to make a square peg fit into a round hole. These artist picked the tunes that appealed to them individually and they didn't try to rewrite history... Only to graciously expand on it. Every one of the songs has been crafted to perfection. The song "Superstition" has a Heavy Rock sound and vocals; "Sir Duke" has a Pop sound; "Isn't She Lovely" has two versions - Urban/Pop and Smooth Jazz; "I Was Made To Love You," the first single off the album has a smooth Jazz feel as well; "Don't You Worry about a Thing," and "For Once in My Life" which has a Pop vibe and vocals. The singers did a wonderful job nailing Stevie Wonder's vocal vibe.

When I heard Vernon's arrangements on this Tribute CD --- "A Tribute to Stevie Wonder: Vernon Neilly and Friends" on Boosweet Records. ... I was flooded with grand, reflective and heartfelt emotions by several songs... I was 15 at the time and the world was new to me and so were Stevie Wonder's youthful and intriguing sounds. Vernon's CD has tapped into my youth. The music has conjured up happy, energetic feelings and that old adventure-ist spirit of yester-year. Stevie Wonder has an uncanny style with his gospel/Motown/jazz/fusion/blues/ pop influenced music that is easily identifiable. His motifs and hooks seem to dance around the music instead of just riding along with the groove. You'll find the same here with this all-star cast of musicians.

"I give this wonderfully arranged and played cd a perfect "10" for a being a tribute album... I think this CD will be up for some sort of award in the near future... I bank my money on it!"