

## Bluegrass Unlimited review

Deaton and Dream are a major amazement and ought to be in the running for discovery of the year. She has a rich, soulful voice with a very broad range — the kind of voice that could bring fresh air to Nashville, if that place had the sense to come calling and not try to bland her into pop diva-dom. Her vocals combine power and expressiveness, and she's so gifted and experienced that she doesn't succumb to the temptation to oversing anywhere. While most of the disc is straight bluegrass, some of it the driving kind, her most affecting moments arise, for me, on the slower, country-flavored material, which glows with the subtle passion and color of her voice. Off the evidence of this disc, she could probably make almost any kind of music scintillating.

The set begins with "Loose Talk," an old country hit, done here at a ripping bluegrass clip, followed by some bluesy 'grass on "Better Man." At this point, the verdict is "real promise," and then she launches into the aching original love song "In Your Dreams," and the promise becomes fulfillment. Next, "You're The One" nails it down — a complex modern bluegrass arrangement with a bowed bass introduction, fine fiddling, lead guitar, and mandolin behind a tour de force vocal, displaying Deaton's full capacities. When the song, in the middle, slows way down to a gorgeous few lines of pure Deaton soul, you know you've come to some place special. The ensuing number, a heartbreaker about divorce, with quiet piano, mandolin, and fiddle and a nice harmony turn by guest Russell Moore, is absolutely captivating. If you're not a fan after this, your ears or heart are stone.

Lots of fine bluegrass remains, along with marvelous sweet ballads, including "I'm Not Lisa," the Jesse Colter hit, and a gripping finale of "Amazing Grace."

Eight of the songs are Honi Deaton originals, two penned with bass player/husband Jeff Deaton. She writes beautiful romantic material (such as the title song, based on a poignant true story) and some fierce bluegrass. The latter particularly shines on "Sally Flatt," a back-up-in-the-holler saga of multiple murders that could have been imported three hundred years ago with the Scots-Irish.

The band — Kristen Scott Benson, banjo; Chris Davis, mandolin; Dewey Brown, fiddle; Greg Luck, guitar — produces seamless, sparkling, imaginative support. They sound as though they've weaved their way around each other for years, though the nucleus of the group was formed relatively recently. Rob Ickes guests delightfully on resonator or slide guitar on three cuts, Wayne Benson plays lovely mandolin throughout, and guitarist Mark Mundy is similarly effective. They're all just terrific — inventive, tasteful, melodious.

Honi Deaton played with another band, the Grasshoppers, whose music I hadn't heard until I pulled a few samples off the internet after listening to her here. I'm going to get a hold of their recordings, too, and anything else she's been connected with. This is serious talent, a star in the making, with a top instrumental cast around her. Don't miss it!

- Bluegrass Unlimited