

Miracle of Life

Review by Kelly O'Neil Rating: 5 Stars (out of 5)

With all the confidence of a seasoned professional, Jean Laughlin delivers her sixth album *Miracle of Life* with polished gusto, yet remains as inviting as a threadbare recliner. Laughlin is an immensely talented singer, invoking a range of emotions from mournful to playful with ease. Her lyrics are easily accessible and avoid cliché. Mix these elements together with the feel-good song styles of light jazz and Broadway and an easy listening masterpiece is produced.

Laughlin shares production credits with long-time collaborator Jim Martin who artfully arranged the tunes and employed many of Chicago's hottest jazz musicians to bring them to fruition. Freddie Breitberg engineered and mastered the album ensuring each song glistens with rich, polished warmth. The opening number, "What's Wrong With Being Lazy," is a delightful satire about how ludicrous the rat race can be. Laughlin's animated vocals are supported by the easy-going walking bass and casual, trilling piano. Frank Caruso on the keys is a staple throughout the album and in this particular number makes good use of the sustain pedal to give the piano a full tone, similar to the musical statements of Vince Guaraldi. The horn section has a nice blend with its punchy interjections and tenor saxophonist Mark Colby solos in the bridge. He plays fine, but the solo itself seems a bit out of place in a "lazy" song. Colby makes a more dynamic statement in "A Work in Progress." This upbeat toe-tapper features more great horn work both in the solos of Colby and trombonist Tom Garling and throughout the song as the winds add ornamentation to the verses.

The mid-tempo numbers "Fly Away With Me" and "Smile" are built on the strong foundation of Caruso, Stewart Miller on bass and drummer Bob Rummage. This stellar rhythm section allows Laughlin to use as much rubato and vocal inflections as she pleases and makes it all sound natural. The piano dovetails in and out of the vocal lines and the drums keep it all bouncing along.

Another element to Martin's orchestration is the lush strings that are prominent in the ballads. "Blue" is a classic bittersweet number with Laughlin crooning in after the fulsome introduction, "When I'm feeling blue / I try to see what I can do / to keep myself from drowning / in my tears." This piece is sumptuous and dramatic yet remains unassuming. The other sad song on the album, "I'm Movin On" is unfortunately a bit more mundane about a break up sung in the third person.

Laughlin's best work though, when she is not being humorous, is to be uplifting.

"Brave" is a lovely realistic song about being afraid and she heralds that the world can be a better place if everyone were to care about "One Person At A Time." Any of these ballads but especially "Here & Now" could fit into a myriad of any Broadway plot lines. The string trills have a flair for the theatrics and blanket each of these pieces with resonance. The title track and closing number is a poignant ballad about Laughlin's granddaughter. Her sweet descriptions of her "baby's baby girl" are precious and make for a warm and fuzzy ending to *Miracle of Life*. Laughlin's work is inspirational and relevant, not to mention a pure delight to listen to. Hopefully she is already hard at work on her seventh album.