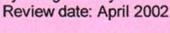


CD Review Bruce Conte

Bullet Proof (2002 Severn Records - CD-0015) by Craig Ruskey





Bruce Conte's name should be recognized well outside the blues idiom, coming from a tenure of seven years and eight recordings with Tower Of Power, but there's little question that his efforts work seamlessly with a blues-roux as the main ingredient. Originally worked up in 2000, this previously unreleased, self-produced offering has everything necessary to garner a wide audience.

"Too Much Cool" leads off with a funky groove and the rasping vocals of Gavin Christopher while Conte steps up with some solid blues chops on guitar, and Ellis Hall exercises his gripping voice for "Nowhere To Go," with a back-and-forth feel that settles into an

R&B workout. "I Met A Girl" features Ed Reddick (formerly of Rufus) at the microphone on a stoptime blues with fine horn charts and more excellent guitar from Conte's battered Les Paul, and Bobby Kimball (Toto) puts out some hefty singing on "Chasin' The Blues," which also features Andre Roberson's simmering sax work. Christopher has the spotlight on the New Orleans-flavored "Mojo Mambo" and "Just Won't Act Right," a sizzling shuffle, shows Tim Scott to be a potent singer, while Windy Barnes opens the furnace door for "Too Sad To Sing The Blues," her vocals a standout. Conte takes his first of two spots singing on the slow and gripping original, "It's Always Darkest Before The Dawn," and there's little doubt his voice has the ability to be as spellbinding as his guitar, while Lenny Williams, former Tower Of Power bandmate, takes the point for the title track offering striking, soulful vocals. The Chuck Willis gem, "Feel So Bad," finds Conte behind the microphone once again, and makes one wonder why his voice only shows up twice, he's simply that good. There's a definite Tower Of Power feel on "There's Room At The Top" with Gavin Christopher handling the lead spot for his third track, and closing out with Junior Wells' classic, "Snatch It Back And Hold It," nearly vocal-less, gives Conte more room to stretch out.

Tower Of Power was one of the more impressive bands from a number of years ago to make the charts while using blues for its foundation, and Bruce Conte's work then was no more stellar than here, on "Bullet Proof." His guitar abilities seem endless, yet there's no grandstanding, and as a producer, he has managed to bring the absolute best out of the wide and varied cast on this CD. Carrying a band of at least a dozen people, to handle the excellent variety on this offering, probably won't happen on the festival or spotlight club circuit, but with Conte's soul-drenched pipes, he could strip back the fat and still be a showstopper with half that number. Contact www.severnrecords.com or http://bruceconte.com for necessary details.