

Musician-singer Valerie June's *The Order Of Time*: A warm album, but ...

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18 May 2017

The Order of Time is the newest album from the talented musician and singer Valerie June (born in Jackson, Tennessee in 1982). It is her first proper release since the 2013 album *Pushing Against A Stone*, which made her a nationally known artist on American radio and television, and received a good deal of praise from the music press. “Wanna Be on Your Mind” is one of the memorable songs here.

June is primarily a guitarist and banjo player whose approach to music demonstrates several influences, though none dominate: folk, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, soul and variations of rock music. The ability to move around convincingly among these different genres, without sounding forced or self-conscious, tends to be one of her greatest strengths.

Raised in central Tennessee, and informally trained to sing in the church gospel tradition, she was also exposed early to soul and blues music through her father, a promoter for Bobby Womack and Prince in Tennessee during the 1980s and 90s. June developed her voice and songwriting in the music scenes in Memphis and later New York City.

The quality that stands out quite quickly is her distinct voice, which carries the twang and lilt of the American south and Appalachian region. Her voice also moves in an unusually high though often mellifluous range. It is difficult, at least in popular music, to find another singer with a voice quite like the one June possesses.

Her songs tend toward stories about sympathy for working people, family struggles, the joys of love, the difficulties of sorrow and loss, and the beauty of music. In general, June is a talented guitarist, and an artist who comes across as consistently humane and thoughtful. The new album does nothing to contradict that general assessment, though it does express some real limitations, more pronounced on this album than the last, which will be discussed below.

The Order Of Time, June has gathered songs around somewhat nostalgic and personally uncertain concepts. She chose to work with relatively unknown producer Matt Marinelli, moving on from Dan Auerbach (of the band The Black Keys) who gave *Pushing Against A Stone* a sharp, blues-gritty quality around the edges of many songs. On the new album, most of the musical elements are slowed down, and the fact of its being produced in a studio becomes more prominent in giving much of the work here a subdued, contemplative, and at times almost “ghostly” quality.

The musicality of several songs seems more mature and ambitious than in her previous work. She now more confidently includes an emotive horn section in certain songs, such as “Astral Plane,” “Slip Slide On By” and “Got Soul.”

On “Astral Plane,” one of the best on the album, she allows an optimistic sentiment to build gradually with the music, ending with a rising crescendo of strings, horns, keys and subtle percussion. There is also the cello-laden sweetness of songs like “With You,” in which June convincingly evokes the dreamlike beauty of a burgeoning love.

And there are also two expressive songs a bit more grounded in the blues and soul tradition, “Got Soul” and “Shakedown,” which are the only songs that work against the generally muted character of the album. The song “Shakedown” is particularly striking for its liveliness. June’s father (who subsequently passed away) and brothers perform backup vocals in a beck-and-call throughout the song. The song, driven by handclaps and fuzzy organ and guitar playing, provides a sense of how musically engaging June can be. It ends up being something of a breath of fresh air in relation to the entire album.

The overall collective weight of the songs on *The Order of Time*, however, tilts toward the muted quality

mentioned above, and sadness and longing tend to carry the day. Songs about the end of a relationship, like the banjo-driven “Man Done Wrong” and the steel-guitar and organ-heavy “The Front Door” are fairly dreary, and it is difficult to find anything terribly moving about them.

Even sweeter songs like “Just In Time” and “Two Hearts” come across as somewhat bleak, at least to this reviewer. The former has an odd organ drone, while the latter’s gray-sky musicality works against the lyrics of someone happy to find love amid difficult times. The vocals are also somewhat distant on both songs, which is a bit peculiar for someone expressing strong feelings of love.

June’s previously noted sympathy for working people does surface on this album too, although not in an overt fashion. Small references to the difficulties of life come through on songs like “Long Lonely Road” (“Pops made his work in dust/ But his hard-working hands fed us/ Sun up till sun sank down/ His body worked to the ground”) and on “If And” (“Men are born strong/ Then broken down/ Burdened at birth/ Till six feet in the ground”).

The singer-songwriter conveys these sentiments empathetically, but they appear to make her weary instead of angry. Where is this grind and burden coming from? Why is it so difficult for so many people to find or keep love? One wishes June would explore this more.

In the end, it feels as though June, for all her warmth and talent, is playing it safe. The album suffers for this. The lyrics tend not to look at anything too directly once she moves beyond the immediacy of love and grief. The few up-tempo and invigorating songs seem almost out of place on the album.

As to why she is moving in this more subdued musical direction, one suspects it has something to do with larger issues and the still difficult political and cultural climate. The general social quiescence has fostered a tendency, particularly in rock music, to inordinately celebrate inwardness, self-doubt and even misanthropy. In *The Order Of Time*, one unfortunately feels June hovering around these moods, if not necessarily embracing them.

June, an honest and sensitive artist, expresses openly some of the problems. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, she was asked why her songs, which frequently straddle the folk music tradition, weren’t more political, as has often been the case in the genre. Her response was revealing:

“I made a record, and I received these songs. And I have protected them. I’m their servant. And nowhere along the way does that involve anything political. I don’t

turn on the news, I don’t know what’s going on with the world in that sense, I am very protected in my space. It’s very sacred. And as the servant of the song, I don’t want to allow this world to take away the beauty of what I have created by asking me about politics. What in the world? Can we not just have beautiful music? Can we not just create something that is happy and fun?”

No one is likely to object under any circumstances to making or having “beautiful music.” The more pertinent question might be: is there a connection between the creation of such music, in the final analysis, and a profound feeling for the world and not a shrinking from it?

June’s sentiment probably has different aspects. Some of them are decent ones: a disgust with the official political set-up in America and everything connected to it, including its criminality and corruption, its wars, the economic suffering it imposes and the lies it endlessly tells.

While the revulsion is entirely sincere, it is an error to think love and grief and hope exist in some other, distinct sphere, the “non-political” one, away from the broader difficulties rooted in the character of a given society. Art does not feed on itself, it deals with social man and woman, the only kinds we have.

The world and politics, mass life, inevitably find reflection in an artist’s work, whether he or she acknowledges it or not. One can hear a bit of the world encroaching on June’s music, but one does not necessarily hear her grappling with it very strenuously. Rather she appears a bit fatigued by it all, and the album reflects that in some regard.

Nonetheless, Valerie June is an artist of notable talents and genuine feeling, and as noted there are some rewarding songs on *The Order Of Time*. One hopes the general lull is only temporary.



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