

Shawn Ryan: *Blue Skies*

Album Review by Alan Bennett Ilagan

A blonde-haired, blue-eyed crooner with the charm of a Southern gentleman and the talent of accomplished singers twice his age, Shawn Ryan serves up a sophomore album of standards that is warm and fuzzy and perfect for the holiday season.

When all things post-modern, retro, and ironic are the rage, it's a welcome jolt to hear an earnest standards singer performing without irony or (too much) affectation. In a world of manufactured pop acts and thin-voiced, talentless lip-syncers, a performer like Shawn Ryan seems to stand little chance. A solid vocalist with talent belying his age, Mr. Ryan represents the seemingly-soon-to-be-lost art of cabaret singers. On his second album, *Blue Skies*, he brings the beauty of a classic group of songs to a whole new generation.

A younger crop of crooners, including Michael Buble, Josh Groban, and even Clay Aiken, have stolen the hearts of real-life desperate housewives and soccer Moms ~ a generally-untapped audience for modern music. Whereas the aforementioned trio insures its success by supplying mainstream Adult Contemporary fare (cross-over stuff with mass appeal and little spice or strength), Mr. Ryan produces riskier fare on *Blue Skies*, with its return to simple standards and unassuming vocals.

Pandering to white-washed mass-appeal may have its lucrative advantages, but it rarely produces anything of exceptional artistic merit. True, the two sometimes coincide – and there is no doubt that all of the above-referenced performers carry a certain amount of talent and musicianship. It's simply a matter of how they present it, what material they decide to produce, and the manner in which it is executed. There's something decidedly slick and commercial about the Josh Grobans and Clay Aikens of the world, something that the publicists and the agents and the music industry glosses over all of their products.

Rather than resulting in sparkle or pizzazz, the results are more often dull and bland, as if all the fiddling has ended up muddling and diluting any power or passion that may have originally been there. Shawn Ryan's work retains the raw reality of a live performance (two of the tracks were actually recorded live). It sets him a bit apart from his contemporaries – he seems less polished, more gritty, more real. He's the guy in the lounge, sitting behind the piano and regaling the patrons with authentically passionate performances and honest, from-the-gut banter. Along the lines of that open honesty, he is one of the only openly gay performers out there. Even Mr. Aiken, whom many assume is the gayest thing since Liberace, plays it safely straight - with nary a nod to sexuality of any sort. Of course, political leanings and social matters have little place on such an enjoyable album, and the matter-of-fact way Ryan unobtrusively presents his gayness is charmingly innocent.

Rather than conforming to any sort of teeny-bopper pop, Mr. Ryan's style has more in common with an accomplished singer like Harry Connick, Jr. Both share a bit of a Southern drawl, and an often-understated delivery that is at once gentle and soothing. He displays an uncanny understanding of a song ~ rather astounding for someone of his young age ~ and demonstrates a masterful sense of phrasing. (Listen to the way he deftly inserts a quick bit of "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" to underscore the sweet bitterness of the goings-on in "Down With Love".) Though the production is a little rough around the edges, it does not at all detract from the overall performance, and Ryan shows off a knack for selecting songs that perfectly complement his style.

His greatest strength may be as a performance singer (credit a long roster of theater credits), as in the second track "The First Thing You Know." Give him a character song and he will absolutely devour the aural scenery. At turns wistful ("Moon River") and full of attitude ("I'm Checkin' Out"), there is quite an expanse of emotions conveyed in the fourteen tracks, and Ryan successfully navigates the choppy stretches between innocent and jaded, young and old, and hopeful and cynical.

"Going to the Dance With You" evokes the by-gone era of the gramophone, with its vinyl scratch intro and innocent lyrics, while "Here's That Rainy Day" smokes with world-weary resignation. At the same time, his voice lends itself perfectly to a youthful rendition of "I've Never Been in Love Before", starting off with wide-eyed wonder and deepening to a soulful understanding by the song's end.

The album takes a slight downturn on "Beat My Dog", a live throw-away novelty that doesn't quite mesh with his voice, which is more suitably used to delicately draw forth the subtle longing on "The Very Thought of You" (done so very right here).

With its jazzy undertones and soulful delivery, the best of this music smolders with sultry pining, crackles with sharp wit, and offers a cozy refuge from the cold calculation of so many young singers today. *Blue Skies* is also a timely holiday album, with its inclusion of a winter staple, "Baby, It's Cold Outside," and a cheeky Christmas ode in the form of "My Simple Christmas Wish," (a hilariously catty holiday romp invoking Bette Davis, where Ryan ticks off his Christmas wishes to be "rich, famous, and powerful.") Both encapsulate the warmth and fun of Mr. Ryan's ineffable charm.

The future of a dying breed of vocalists may be found in the no-longer-so-smoky lounges, inhabited by crooners and chanteuses channeling emotion and meaning through standards and classic songs. Shawn Ryan finds inspiration here, and his music speaks to anyone with a keen ear for standards and the classy delivery of a seasoned-pro.