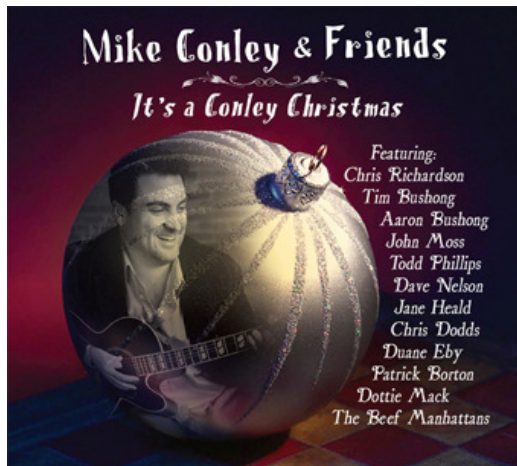


Mike Conley & Friends: It's a Conley Christmas



The title of Mike Conley's second album gets right to the heart of the matter: It's a Conley Christmas. It certainly is, folks. I invite you to throw this in your CD player, sit back with your loved ones and some hot chocolate or an eggnog and surrender to the sounds of this guy's season. Or this seasoned guy. I think you know what I'm talking about, but lest I err on the side of unclear, here's a little preview of your family's new favorite Christmas album.

It begins with the short and sweet "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies," with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic's Jane Heald on cello. Next up is "Christmas Time is Here," everyone's favorite tune from everyone's favorite Christmas special, "The Charlie Brown Christmas." Conley's smooth-as-silk voice lends a mellow charm to a song I would have sworn could never be improved upon. Then there's "Little Drummer Boy," a saxed up version of an old favorite that acts on the Scrooge-ish soul like coal on Cratchit's fire. Speaking of sax, Conley's jazzy "My Favorite Things" soars, thanks in part to Chris Richardson's work on said instrument. These two friends often work together, and it's a joy to see the collaboration bearing as much fruit as it does here.

The album hits a high point with "What Child Is This" that, in Conley and Heald's capable hands, is nothing short of beautiful. A rockabilly "O Holy Night" follows, featuring the expert guitar work of local pickers Duane Eby, Chris Dodds, Tim Bushong and Patrick Borton. And now things get bad, and by bad I mean good. Really good. The Sublime-esque and sublime Conley-penned "Bad Boy Christmas" puts the nice in naughty. It's refreshing to get a little taste of a Conley original swaddled in amongst the classics.

Speaking of classics, his "Winter Wonderland" winningly twists the hit into new, slightly minor-key territory, and just when you thought it might be safe to put away your dancing shoes he launches into another energy-packed Christmas staple, "Away in a Manger." The virgin birth has never been so rockin'. The surprises keep coming with Conley's rewritten and bordering on unrecognizable but charming all the same "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Then he sticks to the tried and true with "The Christmas Song." You can smell the chestnuts roasting on an open fire with this one. You can see those tiny tots. The album closes with a safe yet subtle "We Three Kings."

Conley is arguably one of the hardest working guys on the Fort Wayne music scene, and this album just goes to show what a little blood, sweat, tears, talent and yuletide spirit can do. (Deborah Kennedy.....12-10-09