

Renee Austin □ – Sweet Talk (2003)

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1 *Not Alone* 2 *Pretend We Never Met* 3 *When Something Is Wrong* 4 *Pour The Sugar Slowly* 5 *Bottom Of A Heart* 6 *Fool Moon* 7 *Bury The Hatchet* 8 *Unraveling* 9 *Bitter Water* 10 *Ain't Nobody* 11 *Black Pearl* Renee Austin - Lead Vocals Kevin Bowe - Choir/Chorus, Guitars, Backing Vocals Andy Dee - Slide Guitar Paul Diethelm - Guitar, Guitar (Rhythm) Dave Jensen - Trumpet Bruce McCabe - Choir/Chorus, Clavinet, Piano Delbert McClinton - Vocals Dik Shopteau - Bass, Choir/Chorus Billy Thommes - Choir/Chorus, Drums, Percussion Jeff Victor Organ, Piano (Electric) Cynthia Johnson, Daryl Burgess, Joanna Cotten - Backing Vocals

This Texas by way of Minneapolis blues/jazz/soul belter's first nationally available disc made a substantial impression out of the box in late 2003. It received major press attention and was nominated for a W.C. Handy Best New Artist Debut award. Even a cursory listen shows why. Austin's tough, husky growl can be as gutsy as Tina Turner or as tender as Maria Muldaur. Although her stunning duet with Delbert McClinton on "Pretend We Never Met" is one of the album's obvious highlights, it's by no means the only striking track. The soulful "When Something Is Wrong" recalls Ann Peebles' Hi label work and Austin gets downright nasty on the grinding sexy funk-rock of "Pour the Sugar Slowly." Incorrectly pigeonholed strictly as a blues artist (probably due to her Blind Pig label affiliation), Austin is closer to a classic R&B vocalist in the tradition of Etta James and Turner. Also impressive is that the multi-talented musician -- who plays guitar and piano live -- was responsible for penning all but four of these tunes, an unusual accomplishment for a female singer. Her writing is sharp and diverse as she shifts gears from the gospel fervor of "Bottom of a Heart" to "Fool Moon"'s bluesy jazz lounge mood, just two songs that display her impressive range. Far from scattershot, Austin's talented band and the disc's smart pacing display her strengths without sounding as if she's giddily jumping genres. Like McClinton -- an obvious role model -- her presence is so powerful that she's comfortable in a variety of grooves and, at least on the basis of this album, succeeds at all of them. ---Hal Horowitz, AllMusic Review

Born in Southern California, raised in the Central Texas Hill Country, based in Minneapolis, Renee Austin has a rangy, rootsy voice that glides from raspy to crystal clear to southern slurry while echoing foremothers such as Janis Joplin, Lou Ann Barton and Toni Price. Her phrasing is most reminiscent of Delbert McClinton, who has pulled strings to help launch her career; he duets with her to great effect here on "Pretend We Never Met". Ostensibly a blues singer, Austin is really more of genre-buster like Delbert himself, alchemizing a variety of blues, R&B, soul and gospel styles while giving it all a country flavor. There are some attention-grabbing moments here among the sweet ballads ("When Something Is Wrong"), soul workouts ("Pour The Sugar Slowly"), gospellesque stomps ("Bottom Of A Heart"), late-night loungey fare ("Fool Moon") and upstart rockers ("Bury The Hatchet", arguably the best song on the disc). But there's something missing, too. For someone with such a pyrotechnical voice, Austin sings with considerable restraint -- even her screams are harnessed -- and the band is likewise precise, controlled and metronomic. They could all stand to cut loose now and again, so they sound less like a well-constructed session entity and more like a real band (it's telling that she names her road band members in the notes and none of them appear on the record). The sound adheres to the title phrase a little too closely, when her style would probably be better served by more sweat and spontaneity. But there's no denying the potential revealed on this debut. ---John Morthland, nodepression.com

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