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BOOKS & ARTS | MUSIC REVIEW

'An Evening With Silk Sonic' Review: Back to the '70s

Bruno Mars and Anderson .Paak team up as Silk Sonic, a duo that pays homage to decades-old R&B.



Anderson .Paak and Bruno Mars are Silk Sonic

PHOTO: HARPER SMITH/ATLANTIC RECORDS

By Mark Richardson

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On “Fly as Me,” the third track from the debut album by throwback soul duo Bruno Mars and Anderson .Paak, aka Silk Sonic, the latter sings to a woman he has his eye on while “Hollering at you from a 1977 Monte Carlo.” That Chevrolet model was popular throughout that decade, but ’77 was a crucial moment in its history. The following year, the extended coupe was downsized because of soaring oil prices. The car’s plush and roomy luxury was ended by austerity.

The just-released LP “An Evening With Silk Sonic” (Aftermath/Atlantic)—from the 36-year-old superstar Mr. Mars (born Peter Hernandez and raised in Honolulu) and 35-year-old Mr. Paak (born Brandon Paak Anderson and from Oxnard, Calif.)—is a musical analog to the car in question, evoking an opulent era of R&B that might have been heard leaking out of just such a ride. Those were times of huge recording budgets and grand studios, in which large orchestras filled every available inch of tape with lush and beautiful sound. In the '70s, artists like Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, Smokey Robinson and the Isley Brothers made string-drenched soul into high art. Silk Sonic takes that approach and adds a dollop of snapping funk in the style of Earth, Wind & Fire for an unapologetically retro project that plays to its principals' strengths.

Silk Sonic has had a long gestation period. The pair met when Mr. Mars was touring behind his 2016 album, “24K Magic,” and Mr. Paak was one of his opening acts, and they've come together to record sporadically since. Both are musical polymaths. R&B is the most prominent genre for each. But Mr. Mars is proficient in rock and pop and much more, while Mr. Paak both raps and sings—he's also an excellent drummer—and has a strong presence in hip-hop. Lockdown inspired them to gather the fragments of music they'd assembled. “I'm not sure we would have done it if it wasn't for the pandemic,” Mr. Paak told Rolling Stone in an August interview.

There are two primary challenges in trying to recapture the sound and style of a specific period as faithfully as Silk Sonic does here. One, modes of production and recording have turned over many times—tape has given way to the hard drive, the cavernous studios filled with union-scale musicians of yore are now likely to be approximated by software. And two, the classic records from this era weren't just about their production and instrumental proficiency, but also expert singing and melodies that had to stand out on the radio.

“An Evening With Silk Sonic” mostly overcomes these hurdles. The faithfulness of the production and arrangements is astonishing, and the songs range from solid to very good. The brief “Silk Sonic Intro” lays out the parameters of the project.

After a few horn stabs and chanted backing vocals, we hear the first of several spoken word contributions from funk bassist Bootsy Collins, lending period authenticity. Then the album launches into “Leave the Door Open,” a swooning ballad that topped the Billboard Hot 100 in April. Mr. Mars co-produced the record with D’Mile (Ty Dolla Sign, H.E.R.), and the precise placement of layered voices and strings perfectly evokes the project’s inspirations. (Larry Gold, an important contributor to the sound of soul music for over 50 years, arranged and conducted the strings on much of “An Evening With Silk Sonic.”) Messrs. Mars and Paak trade off on vocals, but the latter’s voice is much more distinctive—when he raps, he brings to mind the grunt of James Brown, and his singing occasionally evokes Al Green —while Mr. Mars’s excels during smoother passages.

In the middle of the record are two songs, “After Last Night” and “Smokin Out the Window,” in which the melody and chord progressions don’t quite match the highlights from their inspirations. The production is just right, but the tunes aren’t of the same quality. During these moments, the project seems more like a technical achievement than an artistic one. But the following “Put on a Smile,” with singing by Mr. Paak that sounds positively tormented, rights the ship. It ends with a crash of thunder and the hiss of rain, pointing to quiet storm, the ballad-heavy sound of R&B that became a popular radio format in the late ’70s.

The lyrics are occasionally clever (“Got her badass kids runnin’ ’round my whole crib / Like it’s Chuck E. Cheese” on “Smokin Out the Window”) and occasionally clumsy (“I can smell your sweet perfume / Mmm, you smell better than a barbecue” on “Skate”), but they’re a secondary concern. This is an album about production details and the effect of the whole, the feeling carried by the arrangements.

In that same Rolling Stone interview, Mr. Mars and Mr. Paak mention that they’d written a song that had a more serious undercurrent, but rejected it because it didn’t fit. “An Evening With Silk Sonic” is designed as an escape, a place to tune out and forget the troubles of the present day and immerse yourself in the comfort of nostalgia, even if it’s for an era you never experienced firsthand. It’s

not an easily defensible position, since one popular definition of artistic worth is that the work in question pushes the medium forward. But it serves as a balm—and so on the terms laid out by its creators, it is a success.

—Mr. Richardson is the Journal's rock and pop music critic. Follow him on Twitter @MarkRichardson.

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