SJB SELECTION

REVIEW · SOUL

Means the World | Reuben James

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Before the tours, records and major collaborations, there was simply a piano in Reuben James’ home. He began playing at around three or four years old and remembers spending hours at it. What was almost a toy would eventually become the centre of his musical life.

Then came jazz training, Trinity College of Music, London clubs and an encounter with a then little-known Sam Smith. James left his studies and learned on the road, turning the stage into his second school.

Even earlier came another decisive moment: as a teenager, he opened for B.B. King in Spain. Fear in front of thousands turned into adrenaline, and eventually into the realization that this was going to be his life.

All of that resurfaces in “Means the World”.

But none of it is put on display.

And this is where Reuben James reveals a rare quality: **he knows how to make sophisticated music sound simple**.

Written and produced with CARRTOONS, the track brings together piano, voice, bass, drums, alto saxophone and flute. Braxton Cook and Gareth Lockrane bring further jazz colours into a structure that remains deeply rooted in soul and R&B.

On paper, it could be too much.

In your ears, it feels inevitable.

The saxophone and flute intertwine without stepping on each other; the bass stays in the pocket and pushes without swelling; the piano preserves something of that childhood discovery of the instrument, a faint **tinkling of notes** beneath which lie years of harmony, study and experience.

Everything melts into **a warm, velvety sound**. Beneath that soft surface, however, a small harmonic machine is busy turning its gears.

It is **weightless complexity**, like a dancer hiding all the hours of practice inside a movement that appears completely natural.

James does not say: look at this chord.

He does not say: listen to how sophisticated this passage is.

He does something smarter: he simply lets them work.

Jazz, R&B and soul end up getting their hands dirty with one another until deciding where one ends and another begins becomes pointless.

> ***“Means the World” contains far more music than it shows off. And perhaps Reuben James’ real talent lies precisely here: hiding the labour, leaving us only the groove, and making something built with enormous care sound spontaneous.***

LISTEN

Means the World — Reuben James — is in our playlist Soul Jazz & Velvet Grooves.

Reuben James with Braxton Cook, CARRTOONS and Gareth Lockrane. Updated every Friday. Selected by ear.

LISTEN FIRST. SELECT SECOND.