

*Balance of Nature* is one of the better recordings of Native American-influenced flute fusion music I've heard in a few years. Flutist Chuck Offutt and keyboardist Michael Dulin play together with an unforced naturalness. Dulin's assorted keyboards (synths and piano) meld seamlessly with Offutt's haunting wooden flute melodies. What distinguishes this recording from others like it (e.g. those of Douglas Blue Feather, John Huling, Chicora, et al.) is that no rhythm instruments are used at all on the album, i.e. no rattles, drums, or hand percussion. As a result, *Balance of Nature* is more "new age" in feel and may also prove more accessible to people who are less into an "authentic" Native American sound and more interested in flowing melodies.

Not to minimize Offutt's excellent Native flute playing, but it's Dulin's deft keyboard work that makes the album so instantly likable. Here is a recording that, after playing the first several tracks, I knew I had discovered a "keeper." Dulin has a distinct ability to bring warmth to the music (through judicious use of his synths) without overdoing it. Likewise, Offutt allows just the right amount of technique to emerge on his flute solos without resorting to overt showmanship. The two artists appear to be of one mind on *Balance of Nature* - playing together with a high degree of symmetry and, well, balance.

The songs themselves are quiet introspective pieces. Differences between selections are seldom dramatic, but are distinct enough to avoid the tracks sounding overly homogenous. "Footprints" opens the album on a somber note, accented by Dulin's delicate piano work and lush undercurrents of synthesizer. Offutt's flute is perfectly echoed to impart a sense of mystery and awe. "Song of the Earth" begins with soaring (but not overdone) synth strings that are joined with peaceful lower register flute melodies. "Desert Wind," one of my favorite tracks, blends subtle bass notes, piano, and gently whistling synths with some of the album's most evocative flute. "Winter's Journey," yet another standout track, starts off with a sad cello-like synth wash and maintains a feeling of sorrow and regret throughout the song.

To describe more songs on *Balance of Nature* would be superfluous, as what I've written paints a good picture of the rest of the CD. This is classic new age-meets-Native American flute music, pure and simple. Purists might wish for more of a "proper" Native texture (through the use of rattles, drums, etc.) while fans of other wooden flute fusion artists, such as Coyote Oldman, may decry the overt accessibility of the music on this album (Dulin's keyboards are so well-done that some people may mistake their sound as being overly commercialism, when, in fact, it's really his attention to detail and professionalism you're hearing). Having said that, people seeking a recording that both haunts and soothes their soul will embrace *Balance of Nature* with open arms. The recording's delicate flute melodies, gentle keyboard soundscapes, and obvious sincerity of purpose all serve to heal the wounded spirit of troubled souls. To my ears, Offutt and Dulin have succeeded, admirably I might add, in that noble mission.

-Bill Binkelman

Wind and Wire