

Mp3 Suttle Thoughts - Urban/r&b: Funk



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The band attributes its success to their unique sound, which is a compilation of jazz, funk, R&B, hip-hop and go-go. Because their music does not fit into one genre a name was created for it, Pocket Jazz. 13 MP3 Songs URBAN/R&B: Funk, JAZZ: Jazz Fusion Details: A Suttle Segue By Eric Brace Washington Post Staff Writer Friday, December 7, 2001; Page WE05 Suttle Thoughts was a jazz band playing mostly sit-down events, getting more work than most bands in town, when, about three years ago, something shifted. "We'd been playing smooth jazz, contemporary jazz, for about six or seven years," says saxophonist Bryan Mills, "but we started playing a cover tune at our gigs, a Grace Jones tune, 'Slave to the Rhythm.' The type of music we mostly played wasn't really dance music, but when we'd do the Grace Jones thing, we noticed it would turn into a party. Everybody would get up and dance." The thing that drove the audience to its feet was percussionist Chris Walker's conga playing and then-drummer Kevin "Stixx" Marshall's groove. They'd both been in the go-go precursor to Suttle Thoughts, Reality. "They put the go-go backbeat on that song, no question," says Mills, who had left the go-go band Proper Utensils to play in Suttle Thoughts. "You've got to be careful because, truthfully, when you start playing go-go you run the risk of being blacklisted from some of these clubs, and we were playing nice places, but people were getting up to dance to the go-go." There's just no denying Washington's own funk groove, the syncopated dance beat that Chuck Brown essentially created about 25 years ago when he stretched out his R&B tunes with percussion breaks to keep people dancing. "We were at the Heart Soul Cafe one night, and I was looking at the crowd and thinking we should get James Funk down here one night," Mills says. Funk, the former frontman of go-go giants Rare Essence, led Proper Utensils when Mills was a member. "And I thought of Maiesha the Hiphuggers, because they were playing R&B but when they'd get [former E.U. frontman] Sugar Bear up there, they got the go-go on, so I admit, I was thinking a similar

thing when we asked James Funk to come down." With Funk sitting in occasionally, Suttle Thoughts steered a course toward go-go. "Word hit the street that Funk was playing with us and our crowds just got so much bigger right away," says Mills. Hoping to find middle ground between jazz and go-go, Suttle Thoughts began offering a bit of everything at its shows. "We used to do three sets," Mills explains. "The first set was mostly jazz instrumentals, the second set would be more R&B dance numbers, then the third set we'd really party with some old-school go-go." The band decided to find singers who could keep the songs' melodies from getting lost in the evolving go-go groove. "One night on my birthday a couple of years ago, I went to see Suttle Thoughts at Takoma Station ," says singer Gene Pratt . "Bryan asked me if I wanted to get up and sing a song. He knew me because I'd been in [go-go band] Junkyard , but at the time I wasn't singing with anyone and I was kind of depressed about that." Blue on his birthday, Pratt got up and sang Maxwell's "Fortunate," accepted the loud applause for his smooth voice and sat back down. "They called me the next day and asked if I wanted to be full time," Pratt says. "I said, 'Oh, yeah, of course.' When a band like Suttle Thoughts calls you, you go. They're so musical. I wanted to be part of that. I couldn't say no." Michelle Blackwell was invited to audition in the summer of 2000. She'd sung around town at shows and on records of folks like rapper Nonchalant . Blackwell had heard the group's jazz and R&B tunes on local radio and was excited. "I'd never been in a working band before," she says, "and it was something I really wanted to do." She passed the audition, then showed up for a gig at Club U . "I thought I'd just be singing a few R&B songs with them, but when I got up there to sing that Mary J. Blige song 'All That I Can Say,' it had the go-go groove, and I was so nervous. It sounded okay though, but that was the first time I heard them doing go-go." Pratt didn't let her off the stage that night. "At the end of the song he said, 'You stay up here!' I was so nervous, but I stayed up there and sang all night." Blackwell laughs and says, "I hope if they've got a board tape of that night, they never let it out." She prides herself on being one of the few women in go-go bands. "There's Ms. Kim from Rare Essence , who really broke through first, seven years ago, now there's me and Kamise Lee with First Touch Band . But it seems like all the new go-go bands coming up want a female vocalist. It shows a new respect and I'm proud of that." Along with recently recruited rappers Taj Mahal and Corleone , Blackwell and Pratt make up an impressive front line of vocalists for Suttle Thoughts. They're backed by musical director Mills, percussionist Walker, drummer Derek Freeman , guitarist Wendell Bacon , bassist Doug Crowley and keyboard player Daahoud Said . "The best thing about Suttle Thoughts is we can give the crowd

whatever it wants," Pratt says. "Whatever they're feeling, we give it to them: rap, jazz, go-go, R&B." That ability to mix things up can be heard on the group's new CD, to be released in the next few weeks. "It's going to be a double CD," Mills says. "One disc is originals from the jazz-oriented side of Suttle Thoughts, and the other disc is straight go-go from the streets, recorded live at a few different places." The go-go side has covers of Al Green's "Let's Stay Together," Erykah Badu's "Cleva" and Black Rob's hip-hop hit "Whoa!" "We just partied those covers up," Pratt says. "We stretched them out and got the party going!" That reputation for getting the party going is spreading. Last month when Sean "Puff Daddy/P. Diddy" Combs was looking for a hot go-go band to record with, he chose Suttle Thoughts and did a live recording at 2:K:9.

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