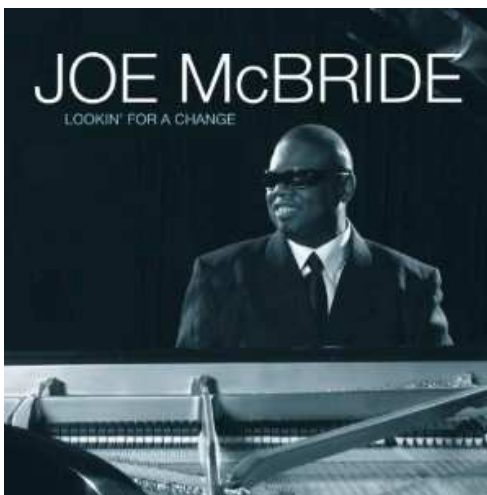




Joe McBride: Lookin' for a Change

By Jonathan Widran



A first glance at the track listing of veteran singer and keyboardist Joe McBride's long awaited first disc since 2005's *Texas Hold 'Em* reveals a lot of familiar song titles and the notion that it's yet another in a long line of contemporary jazz cover albums that have been popular in this current decade. So the question is, how exactly is he, to quote the album title, "Lookin' For A Change"? Well, first, he relocated several years ago to Cleveland, the home of his label, where he has established a close working relationship with several of Ohio's top young jazz musicians, who came to form the rhythmic foundation of what turns out to be an extraordinary recording: guitarist Dan Wilson, drummer Elijah Gilmore and upright bassist Roger Hines. Sonically, there is a notable shift from McBride's typical electronic approach. He has played acoustic

piano extensively before, but always over the top of arrangements that were primarily put together with drum machines and other technology. Going fully acoustic and doing exciting, highly improvisational jazz interpretations of nine familiar pop songs—in addition to three originals—makes for a project that has an instant appeal but truly grooves, stretches and shows McBride's tremendous growth as both a composer and vocal and instrumental interpreter. And it is a change from many other instrumental cover albums in that these are distinctive, newly definitive versions rather than muzak-y.

The first adjective that hits the listener hearing the playful opening chords of Gnarl's Barkley's "Crazy" is "joy." McBride's voice and cheerful chordings hop, skip and jump energetically over a hypnotic percussive beat before he breaks into a wild piano solo. His version of Vanessa Carlton's "1000 Miles" manages to capture the song's easy blend of colorful, tender beauty, emotional longing and—via staccato grooves and rolling piano lines—a need to travel. The fun of *Lookin' For A Change* is the mix of the familiar and obscure. Coldplay's had bigger hits than "The Scientist" (from 2001's *A Rush of Blood to The Head*), but McBride finds elegance as he brings it to fans who are probably more familiar with the band's more recent work. He gives Cameo's "Word Up" a spirited, stride-inspired funk twist, then charms at last with his own composition, the thoughtful "wonder what went wrong" reflection "It's Over Now." Rob Thomas might have introduced us to his explanation of "This Is How A Heart Breaks," but said heart never beat quite as intensely as it does on McBride's funky, plucky, ivory twinkling jazz twist.

The journey into pop hits of the era continues on a sweetly rendered take on Seal's "Kiss From A Rose," a sparse and wistful, slightly Latin "Like A Star" (Corinne Bailey Rae), a blues-funk-jazz

spin on Gavin DeGraw's "I Don't Wanna Be" and John Mayer's hypnotic "Say." McBride tosses in a few originals so cool, graceful and easily funky that he's daring us to wonder if we've encountered them before; with its sweet harmonica, the romantic "Secret Rendezvous" sounds like it could have been a Stevie Wonder original, while the infectious rhythmic title track has powerful social message and a jazzy-R&B Al Jarreau like vocal flow. McBride has always been an incredible singer, composer and keyboardist, but the electronic element has limited him a bit in his quest to become a more artful jazz artist. Working with a trio, having a blast while creating classic jazz takes on some of our most beloved pop songs, he's well on his way. If that's not change, it's hard to know what is!