



## Robin McKelle - Modern Antique

By Woodrow Wilkins



Sometimes, when a jazz vocalist does a big band arrangement of a rock or pop hit, the results can be classical. Robin McKelle avoids that trap from the very start with her swinging rendition of Steve Miller's "Abracadabra." The lyrics are perfectly suitable for a jazz offering, and the blend of McKelle's voice and the horns is magical.

That cover opens *Modern Antique*, McKelle's follow-up to her debut, *Introducing Robin McKelle* (Cheap Lullaby, 2006). Boston-bred McKelle has taught voice at her alma mater, Berklee College of Music, and has sung with the Boston Pops. As she did before, McKelle invested a lot of her personal finances to make this project come to life—commissioning the arrangements and hiring the musicians.

The ensemble delivers a delightful take on Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek." After the second chorus, the horns come in with a flourish, setting up Chris Gottlieb's tenor sax solo. Though the tenor is in the lead, the other horns provide subtle background, before McKelle comes back in with energy and passion.

One of the more enjoyable songs, on an album that's loaded with them, is "Go to Hell." This low-range piece features muted trumpets in the background and a slick rhythm. McKelle shows some vocal dexterity here, singly softly for the music part but belting it out when it matters. The emphatic points are made solidly by her voice and the horns, in total synch. Throughout, Dan Higgins underscores on the flute.

George Shearing's "Lullaby of Birdland" is given star treatment. McKelle scats worthy of one of her influences, Ella Fitzgerald, and the brass comes through powerfully. McKelle complements this collection of standards with her own composition, "Remember." This original ballad features McKelle's voice, backed only by the piano and the string section.

Like many vocalists, McKelle covers classics. What sets her apart though, is her knack for making them sound almost original with new arrangements, making *Modern Antique* an appropriate title and a fine collection.