

ROBIN McKELLE

'MESS AROUND'

RCA Victor / Sony Music

After two jazz albums ('*Introducing Robin McKelle*' and '*Modern Antique*'), songstress Robin McKelle breaks with her former classicism to bring us a magnificent new album that spans rhythm 'n' blues, soul and jazz with huge talent and authority.

This as yet little-known but dazzling dimension of the singer's art covers an entire tradition of great soul music (by Ray Charles and Nina Simone especially) expressed with rare power and authenticity.

Along with covers of standards by Willie Dixon, Arthur Hamilton and Doc Pomus, as well as self-penned songs, Robin McKelle includes highly-successful, original takes on titles by Leonard Cohen, the Gibb brothers (The Bee Gees) and Lennon & McCartney. She is ably backed by a formidable group of musicians. Among them is Fred Wesley (James Brown's legendary trombonist), who has contributed two superb arrangements to the album legendary sax player Houston Person on two tracks.

Biography

"I've wanted to do this kind of album for a long time. It's a project that spans a number of genres: soul, blues and jazz - all musical styles I love and which define my personality. It's an organic, flesh-and-blood record, recorded with musicians close to me. It has quite a 60s flavour, inspired by the albums Ray Charles and Nina Simone were making at the time." Robin McKelle's husky warm contralto more than measures up to these rhythm 'n' blues songs, which suit her natural expressiveness perfectly. As one jazz diva after another took to the airways, Robin (originally from Rochester in New York State) needed to stand out from the competition in record shops. "On stage, people have an idea of who I am. I've always made room for this kind of repertoire in my concerts, but on record, it took me a while to express this character trait, this enthusiasm. I'm obviously not in the same category as Diana Krall or Norah Jones, so I might as well deal with it since that's the way it is (laughter)."

After two albums devoted to big-band jazz and swing - *Introducing Robin McKelle* (2006) and *Modern Antique* (2008) - *Mess Around* is a departure from a certain notion of classicism. Its themes are drawn from very different sources (The Bee Gees, Leonard Cohen, Doc Pomus, Willie Dixon and the Beatles), but the aesthetic choices lend a wealth of meaning and consistency to the session, ably led by the songstress. "I was involved in this CD from start to finish. I wrote some of the songs, worked on the arrangements of certain covers and chose the right artists to add that soulful touch." The legendary Fred Wesley (James Brown's former trombonist and musical director, who also played with the Count Basie Orchestra) arranged two of the tracks; tenor saxophonist Houston Person (a hard-bop icon with a dense, sensual sound) crafts two enchanting solos; and Marvin Sewell (Cassandra Wilson) is one of today's most subtle jazz-guitar soloists. Generally working with a quartet including organ and/or electric piano, bass and drums, and a matchless brass section, Robin McKelle has assembled all the right ingredients to fully express the

unique texture of her timbre and the stripped-down, affectation-free verve of her performance as she returns to her first loves.

Influenced by her mother who sang in a church choir, at the age of fifteen, the talented young Robin McKelle paid her dues in small R&B groups. Learning piano and French horn, she went on to study jazz at Miami University (1994-1996) before entering the Berklee College Of Music in Boston and graduating (1999). Back on the West Coast, she regularly worked as a backing vocalist. "If I'd had to settle for singing jazz, I could never have made a living, so I did quite a lot of touring with artists who included Michael McDonald and Bebe Winans. Pop and rock gigs. I have absolutely no regrets. I learned my trade on the job."

Returning to the Berklee College Of Music as a teacher, Robin McKelle entered the Thelonious Monk competition in Washington and won a prize in 2004. Her career was now launched. In Europe particularly, the public embraced the generous artist. "Actually, I always liked great soul music. First Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone and Gladys Knight, then Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan. For me, those women are part of the same history. They personify the same total sincerity, even if the styles are different."

Consequently, *Mess Around* focuses on the singing, rejecting today's over-aseptic production trends. The result should delight the eclectic audiences who have followed her on tour (especially in Europe) and win over new fans, who will be enchanted by the immediate impact of the record, which they will want to play again and again.

Robin McKelle explains the message and general approach of the songs on her album, track by track. "There are classics and less familiar titles. The originals aren't necessarily soul or blues numbers. We worked on the sound to give a consistent feeling to the session."

- "Mess Around": "This is the single: the age-old story of a guy wondering whether his girlfriend is cheating on him. I wrote it in a very Ray Charles style."

- "I Can't See Nobody": "A Bee Gees song. If you hear the original version, it's completely different to ours. We've stressed the brass, with Fred Wesley."

- "Never Make A Move Too Soon": "Houston Person is an adorable man and a great musician. He adds a very human touch to this blues."

- "Everybody Knows": "Here again, I've totally rearranged this Leonard Cohen song. I performed it at the Olympia a year ago. We've added a Motown flavour. I hope Leonard Cohen likes it."

- "Angel": "I wrote it after September 11th 2001, which explains its dark, serious side."

- "Until The Day I Die": "Marvin Sewell is magnificent on this muted blues."

- "Cry Me A River": "How can you come up with a fresh take on such a familiar classic? People love it and I enjoy singing it. Originally, it was a jazz ballad, but we've given it more of a blues patina. In France, audiences are very fond of this song, so it's a little like my present to the public there (laughter)."

- "Lonely Avenue": "A classic by Doc Pomus made famous by Ray Charles, with an irresistible swing orchestrated by Fred Wesley."

- "Eleanor Rigby": "I've already been singing it for a few years on stage. We've added a 'Cold Sweat' type beat and a Latin jazz touch. The effect is quite original."

- "I Just Want To Make Love To You": "We started out with a Count Basie style arrangement, but when we got to the studio, the beat turned groove. Since it sounded good and effective, we stayed with this more compact sound, with a very fine Houston Person solo as a bonus."

- "Since You Looked In Your Eyes": "The fourth and final song I wrote on this album: a minimalist love song to end on a sweet note."