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ROBIN MCKELLE

Mess Around

E1

Review by Ron Weinstock

ROBIN MCKELLE MESS AROUND



Robin McKelle's new recording "Mess Around" (E1 Music) represents a change from the 2 Big Band CDs she previously recorded. Spanning soul, blues and jazz she says she was inspired by the 60s albums by Ray Charles and Nina Simone (she also references Etta James) which enables to her investigate somewhat different musical textures than in the larger settings of her earlier discs as many of these sides use what might be called a little big band setting, rhythm section and three to five horns with a strong group of material including four McKelle penned originals and seven imaginative covers of material from such notable sources as Bee Gees, Leonard Cohen, Doc Pomus and Willie Dixon. Fred Wesley contributed a pair of arrangements and Houston Person adds tenor sax solos to a couple of tracks. Interestingly, only a couple selections have guitar. The core of the band here is bassist Tim Lefevbre and drummer Mark McLean, with Adam Klipple, Xavier Davis and Alain Maillet sharing the keyboards.

She certainly belts out her vocals throughout right from the title track, a striking original where she tells her lover she ain't messing around with his hurt, cause she wants to hold him in her arms and squeeze him tight. Fred Wesley contributed the striking, original and funky arrangement for her heartfelt rendition of The Bee Gees' "I Can't See Nobody," followed by a rocking, shuffle rendition of the Hooper-Jennings "Never Make a Move Too Soon," (a hit for B.B. King) which sports wonderful tenor saxophone by the great Houston Person and a terrific arrangement by Alain Maillet. Leonard Cohen's "Everybody Knows," was not a familiar to these ears but McKelle certainly delivers the lyrics in a convincing fashion as Alex Harding blasts away on baritone sax on a strong bluesy performance. "Angel," another McKelle original, takes the tempo and volume down, and shows a bit more reflective side here on this gloomy performance with a lovely horn arrangement. Marvin Sewell, Cassandra Wilson's guitarist, is added to the hornless "Until the Day I Die," and crafts a nice solo. Klipple's organ and Fender Rhodes add to the atmosphere behind the yearning mood she expresses here.

On the standard "Cry Me a River," McKelle sounds like a grittier Julie London, nicely sung with more marvelous support from the horns, while Fred Wesley contributes the new arrangement of the old Ray Charles hit, Doc Pomus' "Lonely Avenue," which McKelle really pours her heart into. McKelle herself contributed the latin-funk arrangement for "Eleanor Rigby," which comes off as if she was singing for Willie Bobo or the like. Mark Tucker enlivens the fresh interpretation with some fine tenor sax. Houston Person returns to solo on a sultry, swinging take by McKee on Willie Dixon's "I Just Want to Make Love to You," before she closes the disc with the hornless group again on her original "Since I Looked In Your Eyes," with Marvin Sewell adding some bluesy slide guitar.

An impressive album that is beautifully played and McKelle certainly places her stamp on the performances. She perhaps has a tad bit more vibrato than my own taste would prefer, but that is my own preference. She certainly has produced an outstanding album that should appeal across genre boundaries, and to fans of blues and traditional R&B as well her fans from her prior releases.