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LONG LIVE KING

Kano

My Manor

Snarky Puppy

Bark & Bite

Plus...

Esperanza Spalding

Iba Mahr

Robin McKelle

Gentleman

Pimp C



contents

volume 41
// issue 02

OUT THERE	4	FRONTLINES
	10	GIG GUIDE
	12	20 QUESTIONS: ESPERANZA SPALDING
SOUL/R & B	14	ROBIN MCKELLE
	16	SOUL SIDES
	18	KING
	20	MO JUICE
HIP-HOP	22	KANO
	24	BEATS, RHYMES & LIFE
JAZZ	26	SNARKY PUPPY
	28	SMOOTH TO THE GROOVE
REGGAE	30	IBA MAHR
	32	RUN THE TRACK
	34	GENTLEMAN
	36	VIBES
ALBUMS	37	REVIEWS
NORTHERN	44	NORTHERN EXPOSURE
CLASSIFIED	46	CLASSIFIED ADS



P14 – Robin McKelle
“I wanted to change up the sound and do what I wanted to do this time.”



P22 – Kano
“All that trying to fit in, or capitalise, that’s never been my thing...”



P30 – Iba Mahr
“I’m always listening to older songs... especially sounds from the sixties and seventies.”



P34 – Gentleman
“I liked the idea of having a German guy, a Jewish guy and a Rasta guy all on the same track.”



ON REFLECTION

Robin McKelle has been discovering the woman in the mirror during the making of her new album. Chris Wells likes what he sees.

Why, you may be wondering, has Robin McKelle called her newly created boutique label 'Doxie Records'? For isn't the word 'doxie' or 'doxy' an old-fashioned term for a woman of ill repute? Well, yes, it is: 16th century, actually, possibly a derivation of the Middle Dutch word 'docke', for doll. [I looked it up.]

But 'doxie' is also American shorthand for 'dachshund' and I'm happy to report that Ms McKelle is the owner of a loyal pooch of such a breed, and it is to her much loved pet she is referring in the label's handle.

Doxie Records will next month greet the arrival of Robin's latest album, *The Looking Glass*, to which we also gave a warm advance welcome in last month's *Soul Sides*. It's a follow-up to her much praised southern soul set, *Heart Of Memphis*, for Okeh/Sony and not only marks the first occasion on which she's made an album entirely of original material, but also sees her step away from her regular support band The Flytones in search of a new sound. All change, then.

"I wanted to change up the sound and do what I wanted to do this time," asserts Robin over a Skype video call. "Okeh were really cool and they worked with me - they weren't super-hands-on, or anything - but in the end I wanted more control. The contract was up and I wanted to see what I could do on my own. I have a good fan-base and I already paid for everything anyway. And I am selling most of my albums at shows, so now I have full control and I make a bigger return. Plus, I was a pretty small

“It’s not ‘Robin Sings Jazz’ or ‘Robin Goes To Memphis’: this is me. It’s a vulnerable project in that respect.”



artist on a big label, so sometimes it felt like my ideas were being shot down – musical things that they didn't wanna do, I mean. To be honest, I found that a little frustrating. This record is a fresh start.”

A fresh start that has introduced her to producer Steve Greenwell [of Joss Stone, Diane Birch and Steve Forbert fame] and a very impressive bunch of A-list musicians: George ‘Spanky’ McCurdy, touring drummer for such as Kanye West, Lady Gaga and Diddy by night as well The Lord Almighty in church every Sunday morning; bassist Jack Daley [of Lenny Kravitz notoriety]; and the magnificently named Ray Angry, who plays piano for the likes of D’Angelo and The Roots. The only Flytone still on board is long-time friend and guitarist Al Street.

“The drum and bass are the big changes on this this album, but I was very happy to use Al. Not that the rest of the old guys couldn’t do this stuff, but I didn’t want any preconceived notions this time, that’s all. I thought that Al could take the time and be open enough to hear and do different things. He was happy to create something new. He gave us his time, because we wanted to sit with it a while and think about how it might be different.

“This is the first time I have worked with a producer since... the second album, I guess. Usually I’ve produced myself or with the guys in the band. I didn’t have a *terrible* experience with my producer back then, but there were certain things, like cutting up and editing my vocals, that pissed me off. I got a little burned by that.

“Anyway, I started looking and came across Steve Greenwell, and his sound and his knowledge of music was pretty cool. And he really wanted to work with me, which was important, because I didn’t have a huge budget. We worked together a lot on finding new ways to modernize my style of songwriting – because my style is pretty classic in that regard. His idea was to look for some young guys on the scene, from maybe a hip-hop angle – like the drummer, Spanky, who has hip-hop *and* gospel in his sound. Steve was instrumental in finding players like him. I had been working with The Flytones for four or five years, so I didn’t know who the new cats around New York City were any more. You need guys who really love the music and want to do it right, because it’s their thing – it can’t be just a paying gig.”

The result is an album that still puts McKelle in a soul setting for parts of the sequence – last month we picked out *Forgive Me*, an excellent mid-tempo tune with a pleasantly tricky drum part and a couple of strong hooks, and *Brave Love*, a fine shuffler with some nice percussion and a subtly vulnerable lead from Robin – but it also blends in some pop and country-rock sounds that could bring her to new audiences.

“Yes, that’s part of it for me too,” admits Robin. “Steve was trying to help me see out my vision for the album, but my problem was that I didn’t really have one at first. The Memphis album was easy in that respect. But what I did do was to write what I write: I sat down at the piano and I wrote songs. So it has a familiar Carole King/Elton John kinda vibe about it. That’s at the core.

“Basically, Steve said it would in the end be about the songs and we didn’t know what it would sound like until we had those songs ready – they would tell us which way to go. I was concerned about that for a long time because all I was hearing was this guy who was in touch with the universe telling me the universe would tell us what to do! I had no idea what he was talking about. Actually, I’m thinking he’s crazy! But eventually I understood: it wasn’t a race, but about making an album in proper time.

“After all, who am I? I’m a white singer from Rochester, New York and I sing very soulfully. I’m not a neo-soul singer. My writing is more pop. How do we bring all those things together? All I could do was write from my heart and see what evolved. So this album is who I am. It’s not ‘Robin Sings Jazz’ or ‘Robin Goes To Memphis’: this is *me*. It’s a vulnerable project in that respect.”

Now all Robin has to do is make and edit the video, choose all the photographs, run the label, get out on tour... basically all the things an indie label artist has to do as a matter of course instead of relying on the major to take care of such matters. It’s going to be a challenge.

“Well, we have been able to choose the press people and the marketing angle this time. We chose the single and we’ll spend the money where it’s important - so we’ve decided to spend it on a video, because people expect to be able to see you up on Youtube. We have to be there. Yeah, we have to be more hands-on with the whole process. It’s a lot of work. I had people to edit the EPKs before and now its up to me – and what do I know about it? I hate all my photos! But I am learning to be more objective and my manager is doing a lot of work on that. Will it work? Or will it be a total disaster? We’ll see.”

Find out how she’s getting on come May 21, when Robin McKelle plays CLF Arts in Peckham, SE London.