

Robin McKelle

“Impressions of Ella”

From country music to rhythm and blues, [Robin McKelle](#) has made an entire career exploring the rich vastness of American music. With [Impressions of Ella](#), McKelle returns to her traditional jazz roots and finds herself right at home.

“There was a part of me that wasn't writing so much,” says the seasoned vocalist. “I wasn't singing a lot, and I really missed [performing] live music. When I [started] to think about what I wanted to do for my next project, there was just so much of a feeling over the time of COVID; this feeling of nostalgia and longing for what felt like home. I felt it was the right moment to change gears and get back into that traditional swing and everything that helped me break into my career as an artist.”

[Introducing Robin McKelle](#), her eponymous 2006 debut, delved into a dozen timeless standards of the swing era (“Come Rain or Come Shine,” “Night and Day,” “On the Sunny Side of the Street”). For her latest effort, McKelle draws from only one source and perhaps her greatest artistic influence, Ella Fitzgerald. “The concept of the music of Ella came about because she was my first introduction to vocal jazz. I learned so much from her singing — the style of her swing feel and her singing resonates [with] me.”

To help bring her concept to life, McKelle enlists a brand new trio of venerated jazz players: Kenny Washington on drums, bassist Peter Washington, and NEA Jazz Master Kenny Barron on piano. “I wasn't intimidated to make music with them, but [their] résumés were like, ‘Wow!’ [Am I] going to be good enough? Are we going to connect? The exciting thing was having the opportunity to sing over them as a trio; that was such a huge joy.”

Impressions of Ella finds McKelle a little older and a lot wiser. More than 15 years since her first album, she finally feels ready to tackle the emotional heft behind these jazz standards. “My voice has matured, and I have grown so much as a woman. I felt like I was really at a point in my life where the lyrics resonated with me, and I could sing these stories because I had lived them. It wasn't like me as a 20-year-old singer [who] really wouldn't understand or maybe haven't had the loss of love or true love at that point in my life. And so I felt like at my age now and my maturity, I was ready to return to this music and this repertoire.”

Impressions of Ella features selections from an extensive catalog, including duets with the Oscar Peterson Trio. However, it is far more than a tribute album. McKelle wisely

eschews Ella's scatting and note-bending style in favor of thoughtful arrangements and keen musicianship that revivify these timeless standards.

The bond between a vocalist and an accompanist is perhaps one of music's most profound and extraordinary unions. Barron, a living jazz piano virtuoso, keenly understands this more than most. Cutting his teeth as a sideman for Philly Joe Jones and Dizzy Gillespie, Barron has recorded more than 50 albums, spanning over five decades, as leader. On "**Lush Life**," Barron opens with warm restraint, reminiscent of predecessors Duke Ellington and Red Garland. Staying close to the original ballad, alongside Peter and Kenny Washington, the trio supports McKelle as she relishes the palpable ache of Billy Strayhorn's tune still felt decades later.

Countervailing the earlier track, "**Embraceable You**" shifts the album's overall mood. A widely recorded Gershwin standard, McKelle takes the reins of this redolent ballad in her command and approach. From the arrangement to its arresting lyrics, an overwhelming heft is felt almost immediately, as if McKelle and the trio members are collectively drawing from their experiences to bring out the song's emotional gravitas.

"**I Won't Dance**" features Grammy Award winner Kurt Elling as a guest artist. McKelle credits Elling as a champion and mentor since the beginning of her career. An homage to the many celebrated duets Ella recorded with Louis Armstrong, Elling and McKelle retain the charisma and whimsy of the original tune, sounding more like two old friends after a long absence.

Perhaps the most unrecognizable of the standards is "**April in Paris**," as McKelle transforms it into a slinky bossa nova. It marks such a departure that during the recording, McKelle shared that Kenny Washington had never played the tune as a samba before. After recording it, however, he quickly said, "I like that!"

With *Impressions of Ella*, she doesn't attempt to reinvent the wheel or limit her potential for creative expression. While it lauds our "First Lady of Song," the album also marks an inevitable coming of age for McKelle's career in jazz, as the fruits of her hard work and years of training finally ripen and bear fruit.

