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Robin McKelle

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ALTERED STATE

ROBIN MCKELLE HAS RETURNED TO HER JAZZ ROOTS TO CREATE AN EXCELLENT NEW ALBUM OF SONGS WRITTEN AND MADE FAMOUS BY FEMALE ARTISTS. INTERVIEW: CHRIS WELLS.

"Finding your tribe, your 'people', is a great thing," opines Robin McKelle contentedly, as we discuss her new album over the phone from France. *Alterations*, just released, is a fine, jazz-inclined collection primarily of covers of songs written and/or performed by female artists.

"I had a blast during my time with The Flytones, for example," she goes on. "For me, it's all about the sharing and the process, and I have never had so much fun recording an album as this one. 'Cause recording can be stressful; y'know, due to time limits and, of course, there's never enough money. Sometimes you feel like you're watching it actually disappear out of your account as each studio minute passes! So managing all that can take away from the artistic process. But this time Shedrick [Mitchell] ran the sessions and I could just sing. I got back a lot of my mojo. Not having to wear so many hats all at once was a relief."

Celebrated keysman Shedrick Mitchell — you'll know him for his work for such as Maxwell and, more recently, on Vivian Sessoms' last two albums — worked in partnership with McKelle on *Alterations*, co-producing, arranging the artist's basic ideas for the material, selecting musicians appropriate to the task and taking the lead in the studio. He was on McKelle's last album too: the well-received *Melodic Canvas*.

"I love working with him. He gets me. We're on the same page," she confirms. "And, y'know, when you share your ideas with anyone, there is always this moment of self-doubt: 'Is this OK? Or is it actually awful? What do you think?' You put yourself in this vulnerable position. Well, Shedrick gave me a lot of encouragement, a lot of affirmation. And he's definitely not a 'Yes Man'."

"What was key for him, I think, was getting where I wanted to go and then hiring the right players who could give me what I wanted. That was instrumental to the whole album, in fact. The team was so important. Everybody came in and we did it over just two days in the studio."

Songs chosen for the album include takes on Sade's *No Ordinary Love*, Adele's *Rolling In The Deep*, Billie Holiday's *Don't Explain* and Joni Mitchell's *River*, all of them as precious to McKelle as they are to music fans the world over. Her bluesy side is reflected in a rework of Janis Joplin's *Mercedes Benz*. Perhaps more unexpected, though, is a pass at *Jolene*.

"My mom always played a lot of Dolly Parton — and also Kenny Rogers — around the house when I was growing up," says McKelle.

"I didn't love Dolly Parton back then because I always thought it was kinda corny, but I did love that particular song and the way she did it. It's probably a combination of the minor chords and the melody, which was cool. And it's not that easy to sing."

"The way I have done it isn't country. Actually, I was listening to Donny Hathaway and I liked the way he did *Jealous Guy* in a similar way: he changed it from John Lennon's original to this heavy beat thing. And then I thought about the way Aretha changed up *Eleanor Rigby*... and these people are my mentors, my inspiration, so I decided to go for it."

Alterations opens with a superb cover of Amy Winehouse's *Back To Black*. As fans of the sadly departed Ms. Winehouse will know, the song reveals intimate details of her on/off affair with Blake Fielder-Civil [whom she ultimately married], the first verse opening with the lines, *'He left no time to regret/Kept his dick wet/With his same old safe bet...*' Robin decided to replace Blake's 'dick' with the word 'lips'.

"I knew you'd ask!" she laughs. "Man, she really wanted to say the word 'dick'... and it sounded right when she did. Actually, I wondered if I should do the song at all if I felt I had to change it. But it was only the one word and I thought it worked in the context of the song."

"THE KEY FOR ME WAS TO CHOOSE SONGS THAT SPOKE TO ME NOW, THAT DEALT WITH WHERE I AM CURRENTLY IN MY LIFE."

"To be honest, singing 'dick' didn't really feel like me; it didn't feel like something I would say. And I needed to feel comfortable with it. I'm not gonna lie, I don't think my mom would like to hear me sing it the original way. I thought about that! I know she'd say it was OK, but in her heart..."

McKelle is again laughing as she imagines the scenario.

"Actually, I rehearsed what I would say to her: 'Mom, I did a song on my last album for you — *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* — so you have to let me have this one'. And, to be honest, I do have a trucker mouth at times! But... I'm not Amy. I was inspired by her, I loved her music and

everything about her. She changed music for so many singers. She wrote so much of her music too, which I respect a lot. She was fully invested in everything she did."

McKelle says that she loved the way the song turned out to the extent that it was in line to be the album's first single. Then she cut her new re-think of Sade's *No Ordinary Love*, and couldn't decide which way to jump. The funky feel of the latter made it a strong contender too, though, since she'd decided to record the song, a number of other artists had also released their own versions. In the end, McKelle's sister advised her still to go with the Sade tune because, having committed to making a video, it might be less stressful to avoid an entire shoot working herself into the angry character required for *Back To Black*. [Sensible advice.] Mind you, the choice of material on *Alterations* doesn't exactly make it an emotional joyride: *Don't Explain*, *River*, *Jolene*, *Rolling In The Deep*, Lana Del Rey's *Born To Die*, even her own song, *Head High*... none is exactly filled with a cheery, uplifting lyrical message.

"Yes, I have always been drawn to songs like that," acknowledges McKelle. "But it's not only the lyric: it's also about something else that goes with the lyric. The music underneath is dark and moody. I am drawn to the minor sounds. In my daily life I'm a pretty 'up' and happy person, but I love making that sound in my own music. To be able to sing an intimate song like *Don't Explain* and then also to sing songs such as *Jolene* and *Mercedes Benz*, where I just open up and lay into it more, is so satisfying. I feel like it all works together because of the arrangements and the femininity that goes along with it."

"The key for me was to choose songs that spoke to me now, that dealt with where I am currently in my life. I tried not get too swept away by worrying about whether or not I messed up something that was so precious, because as soon as that kind of self-doubt comes in there, it gets difficult to trust your instincts."

"And once I'd chosen the songs, I listened to them again maybe only twice more before I went ahead and did my thing. I just stepped away to the piano and worked out how my voice would fit and how to approach each one. I would start playing a song through and eventually it would organically evolve into an idea of a way I could sing it — maybe there would be a different chord, a different rhythmic progression or something. The thing is, you have to not be afraid to make it your own. That was important to me. It needed to be my voice or something a little bit new that I brought to it. The goal is not to make it better, as such, but to achieve something that has been inspired by this beautiful music and touch people. I followed my gut, essentially."

Alterations is out now, on *Doxie Records*.