

Lari White: Singing Outside the Lines



BLESSED WITH A WARM, EXPRESSIVE VOICE AND A KNACK FOR SONGCRAFT, NASHVILLE ARTIST LARI WHITE LANDED recording and publishing deals soon after moving to Music City in 1988. She went on to record a series of successful albums, most notably her 1994 smash, *Wishes*. But for White, something was missing.

"Sometimes I felt like a square peg in a round hole," says White, speaking via phone from The Holler, the recording studio that she and her husband, singer/songwriter Chuck Cannon, built on their property outside of Nashville. "There were some musical directions I wanted to explore that weren't really appropriate within the context of country music — especially when you're on a major country label whose entire reason for being is to get country records on the radio. It was a matter of styles."

So which styles got short shrift? "Lots of my soul and R&B influences," answers White. "All those sorts of grooves and melodies. And there were songwriting directions I wasn't able to explore, themes that just didn't fit into the country genre. I'd been in and around Nashville long enough to know that there is a definite 'corral' of subject matter that you have to stay inside if you want to get on the radio. I wouldn't say there's an exact country formula or that people don't manage to bust outside of those expectations fairly often. It's not so much a set of rules as an intuitive sense of what's appropriate."

But now White is exploring those neglected areas with a vengeance. Her latest album, the self-produced *Green Eyed Soul* (on the U.K.-based Mesmerizing label), features nastier grooves and edgier subject matter than her previous releases.

The album also boasts more White originals than any of her previous discs. "On my first record, I wrote all but a couple of the tracks. But with every album after that, I wrote fewer songs. Partly that's being on the road 200 days a year — you have to stay up 24 hours a day to do that and write songs! But I also felt less and less like I had something to say in that style."

White sometimes writes on the guitar ("I play just enough to get myself in trouble," she jokes), but her main instrument is the keyboard. She studied classical piano for 14 years, and keyboards — especially funky-sounding electric pianos — remain a cornerstone of her style. Lately she's been making tracks with a Yamaha Motif ES6. "I love it," she says. "The Motif is way deep — I still feel like I'm just scratching the surface of what it can do. Of course, I always find myself going back to the great old vintage sounds — the Wurlys and Rhodes pianos, things like that. The Motif is great for a snobby vintage keyboard person! I've been using it for some of the TV shows I've been taping and for all my new demos and work tapes."

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The instruments are also likely to figure on an adventurous project already taking shape in White's mind: a different kind of jazz standards album. "I've been toying with the idea of an album that marries the new technology to a retro style of songwriting. I'd love to do a record that made 22-year-old pop fans get into Billy Strayhorn or Jon Hendricks. I'd like to blend that kind of classic songwriting with the sonics of today."

For White, this tendency to buck prefab categories seems bred in the bone. She grew up in rural Florida, where her grandfather was a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher and her dad was a guitar-wielding rock 'n' roller. "Playing rock and roll was quite rebellious for his context," notes Lari. "He was definitely the wild child. But it's all about passion — rock 'n' roll has a lot in common with that charismatic Southern backwoods religion. Think of Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis. There are some pretty strong bonds between rock 'n' rollers and hellfire-and-brimstone preachers."

In the end, she says, "I guess it's just about the passion, about communicating these intense feelings. As soon as you start thinking about anything beyond getting up in the morning and the function of getting through your day, you're immediately up against these baffling questions about life: What is the point? What is the problem? Rock 'n' roll has always posed those questions very directly. Same with soul music. There are so many connections between living a passionate life on this earth and thinking about what's behind it all."

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