

Ben E. King gives new twist to old tunes

Save the Last Dance For Me
Ben E. King
EMI/Manhattan Records

review by Randal Sneathers

If you're an aging singer, how do you prevent someone from coming along and covering your best material? Why should they make a lot of money by using all the most modern techniques to sound just like you would have sounded if you could have recorded on a 24 track studio system instead of two or four track stuff you had to use in 1960? (See Dr. & the Medics, identicover of Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky" for a particularly loathsome example of this trend.)

The answer for Ben E. King is to go into one of the modern studios and cover your old stuff yourself, and that's just what he's done on this album.

Of course, without some good luck, this would not have been possible. After all, it isn't every living legend of rhythm and blues that gets a shiny new recording contract. Three elements made it happen. First came the general boom in interest for 50's and 60's music, helped along by radio stations like 107.9 GOLD, and by David Addison getting funky before 50 million people on Moon-

lighting on Tuesday nights. Second, in King's case, was the selection of his doo-wop wonder "Stand By Me" as the theme song for the movie of the same name by Rob Reiner. Third was the enormous success of the movie, leading to a video with cuts from the movie and shots of Ben E. singing with a studio audience.

The record actually is more varied and innovative than I had anticipated — quite possibly because of the quality of the help he receives on it. John Paul Jones (presumably the veteran of Led Zep, although there are no liner notes to help here) produces three songs and chips in some bass guitar. Mark Knopfler (Dire Straits) plays lead guitar on a couple of songs. Lamont Dozier (of Holland-Dozier-Holland songwriting fame) and Mick Jones (Foreigner) also contribute as producers and more. Having four producers shows in having several different sounds on the album, mostly good ones.

The title song is the most familiar to most listeners; if you don't know the original, by The Drifters when Ben E. himself was their lead singer, you may know the cover by Edward Bear or any of the others over the years. This version is good, if not exciting, and intelligently features King's spectacular voice, which is like hot chocolate made with



Swiss chocolate and heavy cream. There is some pretty obvious guitar-solo-filler, trying to stretch a three minute original over 4:11, but when it's Knopfler filling, who cares?

"Hallway to Paradise" follows much the same formula, and succeeds equally well, with King aided by massed voices including Helen Terry (Culture Club). Both songs are produced by Mick Jones, with a lot of respect paid to old Wall of Sound production values.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are "Let A Man Do It For Ya" and "Test of Time", with King aided by massed voices including Helen Terry (Culture Club). Both songs are produced by Mick Jones, with a lot of respect paid to old Wall of Sound production values.

"Two Lovers", the last song on the album, might also be the best. John Paul Jones brings horns in and provides a solid rhythm section himself. Ben E's voice soars over this solid background, and the horns, vocals, and bass combine for the highlight of a very good record.

Fortunately, King has not lost much of his vocal power since the days, almost thirty years ago, when he was leading The Drifters' harmonies. It is also fortunate that someone took this opportunity to get him on vinyl. Like the song says: "We must take this chance. / We may never pass this way again."

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