

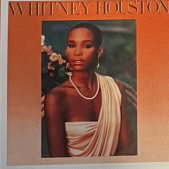
THE UK'S ESSENTIAL BLACK MUSIC MONTHLY

ECHOES

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REVIEWS SOUL



WHITNEY HOUSTON
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(R&B/LEGACY)
In his book *A Little Devil in America* – a thought-provoking meditation on the history of black entertainers in the US – author Hank Anderson considers the thinking behind both Whitney Houston's debut and follow-up being brazenly room twice wearing a different outfit each time, reintroducing yourself to everyone as if you've never met them. He observes: Of course, he's making a playful point about the marketing of Miss Houston to the great American – make that global – public, as masterminded by a certain Clive Davis. For one, Davis was taking any chance those titles re-emphasised Brand Whitney for maximum impact each time. Beyond that, though, it's a telling observation about the calculated repositioning of Houston from her debut as a virtual unknown in 1984 to the follow-up three years later. On her debut's sleeve, Houston appears as an ebony princess, beautiful (of course), regal and a touch austere. The image is undeniably black and proud. The Whitney of her follow-up

SOUL ALBUM OF THE MONTH: 1
ACANTHA LANG
BEAUTIFUL DREAMS
[MAGNOLIA BLUE]
From New Orleans via NYC, first as a blues singer and later a burlesque club MC, then to London and now at last the fulfilment of her ambitions to go solo as a soul artist, Acantha Lang is not a woman to give up easily. June 30 will see the release of *Beautiful Dreams* on her own Magnolia Blue label, a 13-track set of undiluted soulfulness that could very easily have been one of [say] summer '74's top soul releases, such is its sound and style. We've mentioned Acantha's Betty Wright, Ann Peebles and Gladys Knight influences numerous times over the last couple of years, and there's no doubt she fits right with the mid-seventies musical manifestations of all three of those artists, albeit with a down-home Louisiana edge to it all. The latter can be heard most prominently on the street marching/second line outro to the final cut, *Ride This Train* – an extended version unheard prior to the album's release – but the city's rhythms and [especially] guitar licks pervade the greater part of the project. The singles are all here, of course, so favourites such as her tribute to her mum, *Lois Lang*, the song she wrote about her absent father, *Come Back Home*, the wistful *Sugar Woman*, Rufus-ish *He Said, She Said*, the bluesy *River Keep Runnin'*, and the Miami-meets-Meters laid-back funk of *Whatever Happened To Our Love...* they're all right here, sounding like they belong as parts of a complete and satisfying package. Maybe the neatest trick, though – bearing in mind how hard I know she's worked on this since COVID – is how relaxed and easy she manages to make it all sound now it's together in one place. It'll be interesting to see how this goes down back in her homeland too. My guess is they'll love it.
Chris Wells ★★★★★

is in marked contrast: clad in tight white vest, smile broadly beaming, with beaded up hair, her skin is shade or two lighter. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to notice something's going on. The imaging of Houston – not just on the sleeves, but in videos, promo shots, media appearances and more – rapidly proved as the focus honed in on consolidating Whitney as a bonafide cross-racial, mass-appeal superstar. Legacy's new vinyl repressings of the pair – on heavyweight black and coloured vinyl options – gives us a chance to reconsider both records. It's clear from the start that Davis was always had megastardom in mind for his malleable new talent. Lessons were learnt from commercial missteps and triumphs with the likes of Phyllis Hyman, Dionne and Aretha, and applied. Whitney Houston isn't as immediately blatant as its follow-up in its intentions for global dominance. Indeed, for a good half of the record, the cuts helmed by R&B star producers Jermaine Jackson and in particular Kashif – the material and production is easily comparable to any number of classic soulers of the day – Stephanie Mills, say, or Melba Moore, both impressive powerhouse vocalists who each would rarely stray beyond the top 10 of the R&B chart listings. Certainly some of Houston's earliest choices as singles didn't quite measure anything more than that. Her possible pairing with soul legend Teddy Pendergrass on the robust introductory duet *What's the Problem* is peppy, youthful *Someone For Me* (and her clubby Kashif duet, *Trunkin' About You*) all sounded like standard black radio fare of the day, albeit fronted by a formidable vocalist. But the ballad showcases oversewn by veteran Motown hitmaker Michael Masser gave a clearer idea of where Houston was headed. Masser (who had delivered two number one-pop smashes for Diana Ross in the '70s) stretched his sessions between R&B fare and classic pop balladry, handcrafting cuts like the twinkling *All At Once* (co-written by Masser with Jeramy Osborne) for the fledgling star. Critically he also dug deep into his back catalogue to serve up a couple of gems that would prove central in establishing Houston as a cross-generational superstar. Spring *AI My Love* For You had been first released to little fanfare by 5th Dimension star Mary McCormack in the decade Whitney's version was a revelation, the young vocalist, handling the soaring melody with a soulful, gospel intensity and sweetening it very adult lyric about an extra-marital affair with a maturity beyond her years. It was her first international number one hit. Masser dusted off *The Greatest Love Of All* yet another. Already a black radio staple, thanks to George Benson's 1977 original, Houston had the chops to imbue the self-love anthem with a preternaturally heroic vocal performance: from now on she was 'The Voice' for a generation across the globe. But it was the Norma Macdonald Walden produced *How Will I Know* that provided her debut with its irrevocable pop bulwark. Originally penned by pop duo Boy Meets Girl for Janet Jackson – the feisty, gay-glo electro-pop number orientated Whitney in a career club-friendly setting: its synth-heavy production and booming background choir recalling Nancy's work on Aretha's secretaries comeback, *Freeze*. *On Love* it was both the uber-pop moment Whitney needed to cement her status as an accessible new pop diva and the blueprint for attack for her all-important follow-up. Released a matter of months after her debut, *It Wasn't Taking Any Chances* with the lead single from 1987's *Whitney*. *Where Do I Go* was somebody reunited Houston with the team behind *How Will I Know*. Essentially more of the same, but with dial ramped up to 11, of the same, but with dial ramped up to 11, of the same, but with dial ramped up to 11. It wasn't until *Where Do I Go* that the perky power-pop Nashville, who handled the bulk of material on Whitney – was essential in delivering the



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