

In the neo-soul realm, younger artists often mix influences from the present with influences from the past. And that is exactly what Kansas City, Missouri resident Carlton Dubois McClain, a.k.a. Céran, does on his third album, *Live, and Let Love*. Céran brings a variety of direct or indirect influences to this CD, ranging from John Legend, D'Angelo and Seal to Stevie Wonder and the late Donny Hathaway. But it would be a mistake to think of Céran as an R&B purist, and the 22-year-old Midwesterner blends modern R&B with pop-rock and adult contemporary on some parts of the album (especially "Break Free," "Void of Words" and "Feelin' Lucky").

All of the songs on this 32-minute CD are Céran originals except for a cover of Aretha Franklin's 1967 hit "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," which he reworks as "I'll Make You Feel Like (A Natural Woman)." The Carole King/Gerry Goffin/Jerry Wexler ballad has been covered by many female singers over the years, ranging from Mary J. Blige to Peggy Lipton (who is best known for her acting but has also done some singing) to Laura Nyro to Bonnie Tyler to Celine Dion. But it has been covered by some male artists as well, including Rod Stewart and Bobby Womack. And Céran, like Stewart and Womack back in the 1970s, reworks the song so that it expresses a male point of view.

Céran's decision to rework "I'll Make You Feel Like (A Natural Woman)" for this album really underscores his appreciation of classic 1960s and 1970s R&B, which is saying a lot when one considers that the heyday of Stevie Wonder and Motown Records was well before his time. Céran was born in 1992, which means that he isn't old enough to remember the 1960s and 1970s or even the 1980s (he was born ten years after the release of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and eight years after the release of Prince's *Purple Rain*). But the classic soul of the 1960s and 1970s continues to influence young neo-soul artists, and the fact that Wonder is such a strong influence on a 2014 recording like *Live, and Let Love* really underscores his longevity. Wonder reached his commercial peak in the 1970s, yet when Céran is performing "Void of Words," "Break Free," "Feelin' Lucky" or his Aretha Franklin cover, it is evident that Wonder (who is now 64) continues to be influential after all these years. Wonder has influenced not only Céran's vocal phrasing, but also, his songwriting.

Many R&B lyrics of the 21st Century have favored a very raw, in-your-face sexuality. But Céran's songs, on the other hand, tend to be romantic in an earnest way. And that holds true whether he is performing at a fast tempo on "Love Is Found," a comfortable medium tempo on "It's You" and "Void of Words" or is offering ballads that include "Risk It All," the title track and "Noble Fool" (a male/female vocal duet with singer Samara). Céran isn't just saying, "Baby, I want to sex you up": his perspective is decidedly romantic.

Easily the most danceable song on the album, "Love Is Found" operates on the soul-minded side of dance music. There are many different types of dance music, and "Love Is Found" will appeal to those who enjoy the deep house of the 1980s and 1990s (such as Jomanda, Adeva, Ten City or Chanelle) or the disco-soul of the late 1970s (as in Moment of Truth, Loleatta Holloway or Sylvester). "Love Is Found" is the type of dance music

that has more in mind than simply providing a beat: it tells a story and emphasizes vocal personality.

The more things change in music, the more they inevitably stay the same. The fact that artists in their twenties are, in 2014, getting inspiration from Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder and Donny Hathaway bears that out. And Céran's willingness to draw on both the past and present makes for likable listening on *Live, and Let Love*.

Céran

Live, and Let Love

Review by Alex Henderson

3 stars (out of 5)