

Kansas City, Missouri resident Carlton Dubois McClain, a.k.a. Céran, is not an easy artist to pigeonhole. His 2014 release *Live, and Let Love* was relevant to neo-soul, blending elements of 1970s soul with urban contemporary R&B of the 1990s and beyond. *Live, and Let Love*, however, was not the work of an R&B purist, and Céran also brought pop-rock and adult alternative influence to the table. Céran, who was 22 at the time and will turn 24 on April 28, 2016, drew on a wide variety of influences that ranged from D'Angelo, Seal and John Legend to Stevie Wonder and Donny Hathaway. And he also reminds listeners of his diversity on 2016's *The Ultimate: The Essential Anthology of Céran*, a compilation containing previously released material from *Live, and Let Love* as well as his albums *The Art of Céran* from 2012 and *Verity* from 2014.

If R&B is the main ingredient on this best-of CD, it is by no means the only ingredient. Céran is quite unpredictable, drawing on everything from reggae on "The Wrong of Right" to pop-rock and adult alternative on "Break Free," "Feelin' Lucky," "Change for Me" and the ballad "State of Grace" (which sounds a bit like *Purple Rain*-era Prince). Céran usually sings in English, but he surprises us by performing in French on "Encore une Fois" and in Spanish on the Afro-Caribbean-flavored "Amaré Otra Vez" (which means "I Will Love Again").

Neo-soul ballads are plentiful on *The Ultimate*, and they include "Noble Fool" (a vocal duet with female singer Samara), "Open Road" and "All That You Want Me to Be" as well as the CD's title track. Yet Céran sounds equally comfortable with a fast dance beat, which is exactly what he provides on "Love Is Found" (another male/female vocal duet with Samara) and the opener "The Occident." Both "Love Is Found" and "The Occident" favor the more soul-minded side of dance music and have a strong deep house feel. In terms of production, "The Occident" has a definite late 1980s influence and sounds like it could have been recorded around 1987 or 1988.

House music comes in many different flavors. Some acid house can be dissonant, abrasive and noisy, not unlike techno. In many cases, it does not have a traditional verse/chorus/verse/chorus song structure. But deep house, on the other hand, is known for its emphasis on melody, harmony and song structure. Deep house, when it got started in the 1980s, was very much a continuation of the late 1970s disco-soul of artists like Moment of Truth, Double Exposure, Loleatta Holloway, the Trammps, Linda Clifford and Gloria Gaynor. Those artists weren't just about the beat: they had *songs*, and deep house has been a high-tech approach to that tradition. Céran, on "Love Is Found" and "The Occident," approaches dance music with that type of soul-minded mentality. Those selections are not just about having a beat for the sake of having a beat; vocal personality is an essential part of the equation. "Love Is Found" and "The Occident" are club-friendly, but they also work well for just plain listening.

While parts of this collection underscore Céran's fondness for the music of the 1970s and 1980s, the Midwesterner looks to an even earlier era of music with "Troubled Heart." That selection is heavily influenced by doo wop, sounding like it could have been written in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

Of course, Céran had yet to be born in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s or even the 1980s. He was born on April 28, 1992. And the fact that someone who is still in the first half of his twenties can get inspiration from classic doo wop, classic soul and classic dance music is impressive. Céran clearly is not afraid to do his homework when it comes to checking out the music of previous generations.

Céran's broad-minded outlook is evident on this CD. Céran is taking his share of risks, and his desire to look to both the past and the present for creative inspiration is clearly an advantage on *The Ultimate: The Essential Anthology of Céran*.

Céran

*The Ultimate: The Essential Anthology of Céran*

Review by Alex Henderson

3.5 stars out of 5