

Written by Bill Buckley

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It's been seven years since this honey-throated Philadelphia songstress emerged with her much-lauded debut platter, 2000's 'Who Is Jill Scott?' Initially, some observers perceived Scott as little more than a sound-alike acolyte of Erykah Badu, who pioneered jazz-infused neo-soul in the late-'90s. It soon became apparent, though, that Scott boasted a much bigger talent than Badu's - not only in terms of her voice, which is richer and more sonorous, but also both the melodic and lyrical content of her music. Discounting the live album 'Experience Jill Scott 826+' and last year's disappointing stop-gap compilation, 'Collaborations,' this is only the chanteuse's third album proper. On first listen, it's not as adventurous as 2004's 'Beautifully Human' - and indeed, there's nothing quite as stunningly infectious as the killer cut from that album, 'Golden' - but with repeated listens, 'The Real Thing' reveals it has plenty of noteworthy moments. The best of these is the sumptuous slow ballad, 'Whenever You're Around' featuring a keyboard solo from jazz-fusion doyen, George Duke. Other highlights include a couple of slow-jams 'Insomnia,' and 'Come See Me' plus the sprightlier 'Crown Royal,' though the latter track is disappointingly brief. There's no doubting that there are moments of great sonic beauty here but it doesn't disguise the album's one fatal flaw: tempo-wise, the music sounds stuck in second gear much of the time, with ponderous, mid-tempo ballads predominating. This helps create a relaxed, sensuous ambience, of course, but also verges on being soporific at times - a tad more variety would have made for an even better album. All in all, though, a strong and appealing set.

(CW) 4/5