

## LULU: The Atco Sessions 1969-72 (Label: Rhino)

Written by Charles Waring

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Joss Stone wasn't the first teenaged white girl to try her hand at singing American R&B. Back in 1964 a wee 15-year-old Scottish lass blessed with a huge voice made a sensational impact on the UK charts with a high-octane revamp of the Isley Brothers' gospel-soaked stomper, 'Shout.' Her real name was Marie Lawson, though the public knows her as Lulu, of course. After four smashes for Decca, Lulu signed to Columbia in 1967. Although the hits continued, in the liner notes to this new anthology the diminutive singer says she was frustrated by the bubblegum material served up by her then producer Mickey Most. So when her contract with Columbia came up for renewal in 1969, it was no surprise to music biz insiders, perhaps, that Lulu jumped ship to the Atlantic subsidiary, Atco. There, she teamed up with the label's premier production team comprising Jerry Wexler, Arif Mardin and Tom Dowd, and recorded her first sessions at Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Creatively, it seemed the right move for the chanteuse - for the first time in her career she had a say about the songs she recorded - but commercially, her three-year tenure with the company only yielded a solitary UK chart entry, 1970's 'Oh Me Oh My (I'm A Fool For You Baby).' Long overlooked, Lulu's two Atco albums ('New Routes' and 'Melody Fair,' both released in 1970) are reissued for the first time in a delightful 2-CD package that includes a host of previously unissued cuts and rare non-album 45s. As its title implies, 'New Routes' showcased Lulu moving in a different musical direction - and one that probably perplexed the majority of UK pop pickers expecting something along the lines of 'Boom Bang-A-Bang.' The album represents a credible attempt by the Glasgow singer at gut bucket Southern Soul - its sense of authenticity is aided by sterling ensemble work by a Muscle Shoals session band comprising stalwarts Jimmy Johnson, Barry Beckett, David Hood and Roger Hawkins. The fact that the band is augmented by guitar luminaries Duane Allman, Eddie Hinton and Cornell Dupree, highlights Atco's commitment to the project. Hinton, in fact, contributes a couple of numbers - 'People In Love,' and 'Where's Eddie.' Overall, 'New Routes' is a solid set graced with soulful vocals from Lulu, who really shines on the funky 'Feelin' Alright.' A few months later, Lulu recorded her second Atco LP, 'Melody Fair.' It was cut in Miami in tandem with the Dixie Flyers and Memphis Horns - and to underline the quality of the album's contributors, the Sweet Inspirations supply backing vocals. It's probably the stronger of her Atco sets and arguably a tad more adventurous than its predecessor. Highlights include the excellent 45, 'After The Feeling Is Gone,' and a compelling gospel version of Leiber & Stoller's 'Saved.' The second CD in this package is stuffed with outtakes, many of them available for the first time. Although Lulu is patently no Dusty, there's no doubt from listening to this 39-track collection that she is one of the most soulful singers the UK has produced. Well-worth tracking down.

(CW) 4/5

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