

KIRK FRANKLIN: The Fight Of My Life (Label: Zomba)

Written by Bill Buckley

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Sadly, too many so-called soul fans don't get gospel. They seem to have a built in resistance to anything vaguely spiritual. Craving simple beats and hook-laden melodies, they fail to see that gospel and real soul are one and the same thing... indeed without the former we wouldn't have the latter to enjoy. Committed, long term soul lovers know that simple fact full well and they also know that Kirk Franklin is perhaps the current, leading gospel-soul practitioner. Franklin debuted in 1993 with his 17 member choir dubbed his "Family" and together they laid down a template that has served their collective ministry well for more than a decade. That template involves Kirk's emotive, testifying semi-spoken vocal trading licks with sweet ensemble choral work and though that idea might seem limiting, Franklin's albums are never one-dimensional. Indeed with imaginative production work, varied material and creative arrangements the Family's albums never cease to delight and (like all good soul music) provoke and challenge with their lyrics. This new 16 tracker is typical of Franklin's oeuvre. The template we've described is obvious, but with a great mix of up-tempo material, sensitive ballads, old school soul, R&B, traditional gospel - even rock, there're plenty of variety. For those who like to dance, 'Declaration' is the heavy-hitter. The LP's first single, it recalls prime time Sounds Of Blackness, while 'Hide Me' will delight those who like things more sophisticated. This one's a light summery sound with a gentle hint of Earth Wind and Fire and a killer melodic hook. Ballads? Well, 'Help Me Believe' is sweet, 'Still' is classic old soul while 'Chains' is big and dramatic. From a personal perspective I wasn't too taken by the rock guitar that dominates 'I Am God' or the booming R&B beats on 'I Like Me' but I understand why they're there and they're more than made up for by stuff like the modern soul dancer that is 'Jesus' and the almost funky 'Little Boy'. Believers will connect immediately with 'The Fight Of My Life' while for the doubters we mentioned up top, I'd recommend the album as an excellent starter pack to help unlock the soulful wonders of modern gospel music.

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