

## MICHAEL McDONALD: 'Soul Speak' (Label: Universal)

Written by Charles Waring

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Following the prodigious platinum success achieved by his last couple of solo efforts - two albums of Motown-inspired cover versions - the hunky he-man of hirsute, blue-eyed soul returns with a 14-track opus helmed by '80s pop star-turned-producer, Simon Climie. Again, it's a predominantly covers-based affair showcasing the gruff, soulful histrionics of the former Doobie Brothers' front man as he tackles songs as diverse as Teddy Pendergrass's 'Love T.K.O.', Dionne Warwick's 'Walk On By,' Van Morrison's 'Into The Mystic' and Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song.' For the most part, the set works fine - McDonald's passionate retooling of Stevie Wonder's 'Living For The City' is particularly noteworthy, as is his gospel-meets-rock-infused retread of the old Aretha/George Michael duet, 'I Knew You Were Waiting For Me,' which opens the album. However, on 'Walk On By,' his robust, overly-virile tones seem a tad too rough for conveying the bittersweet delicacy of Burt Bacharach's elegant melody - also, I don't feel his version of 'Redemption Song' quite hits the spot, rendering Marley's potent original into a quagmire of MOR blandness. That said, there's plenty for fans of the big man to enjoy here - including fine original tunes like the mid-tempo groover 'Getting Over You' and the achingly plaintive ballad, 'Only God Can Help Me Now.' Listen out, too, for an arresting revamp of Stevie's 'For Once In My Life' and an energetic take on Jackie Wilson's dance floor perennial, '(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher And Higher.' Another thing that can't be faulted is McDonald's commitment to his music - he always gives 100% and sounds like he's putting blood, sweat and tears into each and every performance. In that sense, he's a true soul man. He's also as solid and reliable as a rock - and that description just about sums up the consistency and quality of his latest album.

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