

ESTELLE: Shine (Label: Atlantic)

Written by Bill Buckley

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Estelle (Swaray) burst forth a couple of years back, and straight away her work was pigeon-holed as "British hip hop". Now, even though she's working for the mighty John Legend's label, google-style searches still put her in the same category. In fairness, on this new 12 tracker, there is a deal of that mockney-patois-toasting and plenty of references to Big Ben, boozers, blokes and chirpy Cockneys, but there's also music here that's a million miles away from Sarf London. Indeed in places Estelle offers us a real soul conviction that's more heartfelt than a lot of stuff that's currently labelled as "modern soul". By now everyone will be familiar with the hit 'American Boy'. Its big brashness has deservedly won it considerable success but that very commercial celebrity might put off blinkered soul people from investigating further - sadly their lack of curiosity will deny them access to some great soul cuts. Case in point is the duet with label boss, Legend. The song's 'You Are' and the gentle little tune is as good as anything on his own last epic LP; more, despite the fact that he owns the label, our Estelle is never over-shadowed. Then there's the plaintive 'Back In Love' on which Ms. S displays a vocal vulnerability that recalls Lauryn Hill's first solo album. 'In The Rain' is another superb soul cut. It samples Love Unlimited's 'Walkin' In The Rain With The One I Love' and yes, there is a rap in there but it's totally organic and gives the cut a whiff of contemporary commercial appeal. The album's fourth big soulful event is 'More Than Friends'. Here the sample reference is Aretha's version of 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' and no one would be surprised if you mistook the cut for a Jill Scott outtake. Elsewhere, 'No Substitute Boy' is a light lovers rock romp while 'Magnificent', 'Come Over' and 'So Much Out Of The Way' will satisfy those who liked Estelle as she **was** and how she **is** categorized. 'Shine' though is one of those albums that ultimately defies simple categorization.

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