

Ali Gray

JOHNSON STREET

Is Ali Gray a daredevil in disguise?

No brazen antics. No shocking ploys. Gray's brand of audacity simply works on a more refined level. The envelope she dares to push on Johnson Street is one of real substance and, indeed, this sophomore release should firmly establish Gray as a songwriter who dares to be at once brave yet vulnerable, cunning yet achingly sincere.

With its wide emotive range, Johnson Street, actually plays a bit like a private musical diary – weaving a twisting path through loss, fear and heartbreak, detouring its way around anger and despair, and finding a way back to hope, fortitude and joyous ambition. Production-wise, it moves stylishly through the A-to-Z archives, touching on everything from The Byrds to Bowie, Nick Lowe to Lindsay Buckingham, George Harrison to Randy Newman. Gray's pure voice ties it all together and lends refreshing authenticity to the affair.

From the bright, harmonic buoyancy of "Til The Stars Go Away" to the hard-nosed kiss-off, "Step Out of My Way", Gray reveals both romantic idealism and no-nonsense tenacity. "Pretty Cameo Star" offers decidedly noir-ish lamentation and, paired with the slow-burn of "Come Over Again", we're transported into a world of melancholy and yearning sensuality. On the flip side, "If You Love Me" is a retro slice of radio-ready Heaven.

The native Minnesotan caught a break early on, cutting her teeth as a backup singer and percussionist in Martin Zellar's "Neil!" – a wildly successful and long-lived tribute to Neil Diamond. During that time, she also began work on her debut solo CD. Let You In was largely a stripped-down, roots rock effort; the product of Gray's collaboration with both Nashville songwriters and Minneapolis producer, Patrik Tanner.

When it came time to begin Johnson Street, Tanner again proved vital on the partnership side of things. "With this record, I was definitely aiming for higher energy," says Gray. "More rock and less country, lots of harmony vocals and a heartier, meatier sound." Tanner and Gray also both share a proclivity for heartfelt lyricism, and that mutual sympathy clearly aided the creative process.

Whereas Gray's style might readily appeal to fans of Faith Hill or Martina McBride, she professes reluctance to limit her musical approach to any specific sound or genre. A huge Springsteen fan, she also identifies strongly with Shelby Lynne, Patti Griffin and Jewel. "What's most important to me is freedom of artistic interpretation," says Gray. "I want to avoid being labeled or stuck in a box."

To be sure, Johnson Street shows Gray treading a smart, stylistic line. One part heartland Americana, two parts elaborate '70s rock throwback, it lays all manner of love and loss out on the table while aiming straight for the jugular in terms of both lyrical expressiveness and musical swagger. Grace and guts walk side-by-side here with cool ease.

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