

Shemekia Copeland - Never Going Back (2009)

Written by bluesever

Friday, 30 October 2009 10:07 - Last Updated Tuesday, 25 June 2013 11:47

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01 - Sounds Like The Devil 02 - Dirty Water 03 - Broken World 04 - Never Going Back To Memphis 05 - The Truth Is The Light 06 - Black Crow 07 - Born A Penny 08 - Limousine 09 - River's Invitation 10 - Rise Up 11 - Big Brand New Religion 12 - Circumstances Personnel: Shemekia Copeland - Composer, Vocals, Vocals (Background) Kofi Burbridge - Vocals (Background), Wurlitzer, Wurlitzer Piano Tyler Greenwell - Drums, Percussion Marcus Henderson - Composer, Tambourine, Vocals (Background) Mike Mattison - Vocals (Background) Chonda McKnight - Vocals (Background) John Medeski - Hammond B3, Organ (Hammond) Arthur Neilson - Guitar, Slide Guitar Ted Pecchio - Bass, Guitar (Bass), Vocals (Background) Marc Ribot - Guitar Ike Stubblefield - Hammond B3, Organ (Hammond) Chris Wood - Bass, Composer, Guitar (Bass) Oliver Wood - Composer, Guitar, Guitar (Baritone), Slide Guitar, Vocals (Background)

Shemekia Copeland has moved her recorded product to the TelArc label, has a new producer in Oliver Wood (who doubles on guitar), and pursues a style that seems more refined and less raucous or bawdy than on her previous recordings. The rough edges are shaved, maturity is settling in, and Copeland seems intent on doing things in a more traditional fashion rather than the stomping, tear-the-house-down approach she built her reputation on. She's using members of Col. Bruce Hampton's band in bassist Ted Pecchio and drummer Tyler Greenwell, occasionally bassist Chris Wood and keyboardist John Medeski from Medeski, Martin & Wood, guitarist Marc Ribot, and on loan from the Derek Trucks Band, keyboardist Kofi Burbridge for three tracks. These musicians liven up the proceedings considerably, and the production values of this effort are leaner and cleaner than her other discs. Copeland herself sounds incredibly focused and basic, far from slick but not dirty or messy on any level, and her themes reflect a current-life viewpoint that is part optimist and part cynic, with a big parcel of pragmatic realist. Her poignant castigation of God-driven politicians and jive preachers on "Sounds Like the Devil" is spot-on in a slow-plod beat, "Broken World" is an end-all cautionary tale, and "Big Brand New Religion" brings the sentiment full circle as an antithesis in a New Orleans shuffle. Her songs of hope stem from a young mother's bad-luck struggle in a hard rock two-step during "Rise Up" and the funk-rock "Born a Penny" (featuring Burbridge), which anyone struggling with being born into poverty can relate to. "Never Going Back to Memphis" and Joni Mitchell's "Black

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Crow" feature Chris Wood, Medeski, and Ribot, the former a voodoo-type sly and slinky number, the latter a decent light funk revision of the tune. At her most innocent though atypical, Copeland overdubs her singing on "The Truth Is the Light," only slightly preachy and balanced by some nasty slide guitar work. Another cover, this time of Percy Mayfield's "River's Invitation," seems biographical, as she's looking for her baby, and it's a song that suits her toned-town approach. There are harder-edged songs like the bompity-bop New Orleans-flavored "Limousine" and her well-sung, spirited take on dad Johnny Copeland's "Circumstances," which is more acoustic and down-home, but essentially it's all good. There's little to fault in terms of the diversity she seeks, and there's no concession to commercialized blues here. All in all, Copeland has delivered a solid set of music, easily recommended, that should please her fans and translate to some dynamic performances on tour. ---Michael G. Nastos

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