Allan Harris - Open Up Your Mind (2011)

1. Allan Harris - Can't Live My Life Without You 2. Allan Harris - Hold You 3. Allan Harris - Fly Me to the Moon 4. Allan Harris - Color of a Woman 5. Allan Harris - There She Goes 6. Allan Harris - Autumn 7. Allan Harris - Shores of Istanbul 8. Allan Harris - Inner Fear 9. Allan Harris - Open Up Your Mind 10. Allan Harris - I Do Believe

There is Allan Harris the romantic troubadour, serving up platters of Billy Strayhorn, Ellington and Nat King Cole tunes with his distinctly Cole-esque baritone. There is also Harris the singer-storyteller, two volumes-2006's Cross That River and its 2009 companion Cry of the Thunderbird-into his vibrant saga of unsung black cowboys, their trials and triumphs.

Not until now, however, as his recording career enters its third decade, has an entire album been devoted to a meeting of Harris the romantic and Harris the songwriter. The inescapable Cole-ness that defined so much of his earlier work has all but disappeared. (Intriguingly, it only surfaces on the album's sole cover, a gently funkified "Fly Me to the Moon," suggesting that original material unleashes a more original Harris.) Instead, he eases into a smooth R&B groove more evocative of Teddy Pendergrass and Luther Vandross.

The material, though consistently charming, is occasionally derivative. "Color of a Woman" suggests a mellower take on Sinatra's mid-'60s quasi-hit "Tell Her (You Love Her Each Day)," the sparkling "Hold Me" sounds as if it was plucked from the Stylistics' '70s songbook, and "There She Goes" echoes countless other if-only-she'd-notice-me laments. But when Harris examines more distinctive sentiments, such as the swirling, mysteriously exotic "Shores of Istanbul" or the sinister, duplicitous "Inner Fear," the results are impressively fresh and invigorating. ---Christopher Loudon, jazztimes.com

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