

IMELDA MAY LIFE. LOVE. FLESH. BLOOD. (Decca)

This may be the most radical reset in style yet for the rockabilly queen. “Wild Woman” and “Johnny Got a Boom Boom” are sawdust memories, as Imelda Gets Serious. Embracing her inner Patsy Cline, May raises a torch, dishes a dash of soul, and the results are country-politan perfect. Emotions are palpable. “Call Me” (not the Blondie boogie) is an understated plea to an absentee lover. Jeff Beck rejoins May for the despair of “Black Tears.” May laments another relationship gone awry in “Should’ve Been You.” But it’s not all sad-sack sighs. “Sixth Sense” and “How Bad Can a Good Girl Be?” leave no doubt about May’s mission of intimacy. And “The Girl I Used to Be” is a simple, powerful vow as May considers her past, her motherhood, and her daughter. May may have moved from her raucous side, but she’s tapping deep veins of universal pain and desires. Life. Love. Flesh. Blood. is a gem, both elemental and profound. *****

GRACE POTTER MIDNIGHT (Hollywood Records)

Over four albums, Grace Potter & the Nocturnals have passed from their folk-rock beginnings to Potter wielding her open-E-tuned Gibson Flying V through stadium-stompers rockers like “Paris (Ooh La La)” and “The Lion the Beast the Beat.” Midnight continues this trend with “Hot to the Touch,” “Alive Tonight,” and the rebel-yell “Instigators.” However, rumors are that Potter fired The Nocturnals halfway through the album, relying much more heavily on collaborative writing with producer Eric Valentine – who also played nearly all the instruments on Midnight. This insular approach resulted in quite a number of tracks that don’t sound as fully developed as they might have been with input from a fully experienced band. The drum-machined “Delirious” sounds like a Gloria Estefan knockoff. The melody of “The Miner” bears more than a passing resemblance to Paul McCartney’s “My Love.” And “Your Girl” is Prince without the prance. Lyrically, nothing on Midnight carries the soulful fire of Potter’s biggest ballad “Stars,” from her previous album The Lion the Beast the Beat. If “Nobody’s Born with a Broken Heart” is supposed to be poetically profound, Potter’s romance with Valentine has clearly weakened her critical judgment as a writer. And while Potter remains in fine voice, the diminished influence of The Nocturnals leaves Midnight a mixed bag of tricks. ***

***** Outstanding. **** Excellent. *** Good. ** Fair. * Ecch!

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