

Music: Feature

Ain't she grand?

Erin McKeown brings the Golden Age to the 21st century

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OLD SOUL: Erin McKeown

At 4-feet-11, with freshly scrubbed good looks, 25-year-old Erin McKeown doesn't look the part of the self-assured woman who's just released the sophisticated, musically diverse *Grand*. Her third release, and first for a major label (Nettwerk America), examines fame and fortune, particularly at the time of Hollywood's Golden Age. It is a giant leap from the introspective tone of her previous release, the swing-styled *Distillation*.

"*Distillation* was such a personal record for me," McKeown says, "and such an innocent, naive record, that for *Grand* I needed a little distance, just for a break."

But McKeown, a Brown University graduate, is too cerebral to write a bunch of love songs. Instead, she writes tunes like "Cosmopolitans," based on Judy Garland's alcohol-soaked audio diary, and "An Innocent Fiction," about an Arthur Miller short story where a Jewish dancer evades the concentration camps by becoming Hitler's private dancer. There's also "Vera," which refers to composer Igor Stravinsky's love letters to his mistress and future wife.

The songs effortlessly swing and sway through pop, jazz and lounge to create the perfect musical backdrop for her characters. Through her complete mastery of musical genres -- she has a degree in ethnomusicology and plays eight instruments -- and sharp lyrics that recall Elvis Costello and Jill Sobule, McKeown brings a 21st-century

sensibility to her mid-20th-century characters. She cares for her characters -- even more so after she exposes their dark sides.

"I am a big fan of the *Upstairs, Downstairs* kind of movies, so I do appreciate where you have a shifting perspective between those who have and those who have not," she says "There are a bunch of things like that on *Grand* -- those who are famous and those who aren't, those who are inside versus those who are not. I enjoy getting a different viewpoint like that. And I also enjoy people who have to behave one way in a certain situation and another way in another."

McKeown found herself having to change her behavior when the record company sent back her original 31-minute version of *Grand* with the directions to make it longer and add something more radio-friendly. McKeown, smiled, said thank you, and penned the sarcastically happy and boppy "Slung-Lo," with flippant lyrics like, "She was so down/Look at her now/She's never been so high." It makes R.E.M.'s "Shiny, Happy People" seem subtle. She also added "Cosmopolitans" and a gorgeous, slowed-down cover of Judy Garland's "Lucky Day".

In the end, McKeown says she's happy with the results. "I think [the additional songs] made more sense of the other songs; they were almost like the bookends, or the bread on the sandwich. The perspective of having to step back [and] think [about] the album was done -- and then having to go back in and shape it a little more was actually really good."

While future plans include a more personal studio album followed by a live record, McKeown is also interested in writing a musical. "There are a bunch of things I don't know about -- sort of the daily life in the theater. And I think before I would try to write something for the theater, I'd like to spend some time actually being in something."

This would be a bold step for McKeown, who never played her songs publicly until age 18 because of severe stage fright -- something she overcame through sheer repetition.

"It was a little masochistic at first, because it was so terrifying that I liked it," she says. "So I kept doing it. And the more you do anything, the more comfortable to get at it. Sometimes I miss that feeling of being nervous. It's kind of nice sometimes."