

Justine Blue
True

We were missing a voice like that in France. Here it is, a real soul, jazz and blues voice of today. Who didn't learn to sing with Céline Dion or Lara Fabian, but with Koko Taylor, Etta James, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan. Who matured in the school of the street and then on all the stages of France and elsewhere, from the smallest to the largest. The old-fashioned way. A voice that today evokes that of great ladies like Joni Mitchell or Rickie Lee Jones...

The key word here is “*soul*”: Justine's voice is charged with soul, and so is her band's playing. Made up of excellent musicians – Enzo Taguet (guitars), Romain Delorme (bass), Toussaint Guerre (keyboards, saxophone), Pedro Coudsi and Curtis Ella Foua (drums) – who play a light but relentless groove, full of swing, with a rhythm'n'blues flavour reminiscent of mythical bands such as Little Feat or The Neville Brothers.

Add to that some great backing vocals and horns, arranged Al Green style, and you have one hell of a sounding album. International. This is normal, since it was produced by Neil Conti, the great English wizard of rhythm and sound (ex-drummer of Prefab Sprout, David Bowie and many others), in his studio in the South of France.

Justine Blue's debut album, ***True***, contains thirteen fabulous tracks. Eleven originals that sound like classics and two covers that announce the colour and set the bar very high: “**Willie and The Hand Jive**”, played not in the lymphatic Eric Clapton way that popularised it, but in the original version by its composer, Johnny Otis, and “**Yellow Moon**”, by the Neville Brothers. Singing the latter after Aaron Neville was a daring move. Justine and her group did it, and came out on top. It grooves like hell and the singer's voice is a pure delight.

The rest of the album is just as good, with tracks that catch the ear and make you want to come back. There's even a potential hit, “**Gold in Our Hands**”, which evokes the festive atmosphere of Sheryl Crow's “All I Wanna Do” in its rhythm and coolness. Justine: “*You compare me to her whenever you want! I've been around a lot of New Orleans rhythm'n'blues, but now my music is becoming more pop, simpler, that's what's coming out.*”

“**True**”, which opens the album and gives it its title, with its heady chorus, sets the tone for the lyrics of this record: “*I'm on a quest for truth, for honesty, that matters a lot to me. I talk about it in this track, 'I've got to listen to my heart / I've got to follow what I feel'. There are personal stories, not necessarily very happy ones. But I want to fight, to deliver a positive message, there is always hope behind it. This is what bluesmen are looking for. That's what I like about it, I'm not too down in the dumps every day.*”

Because Justine comes from the blues. With her various previous bands, she won the **first prize “revelation” of the “Blues sur Seine” contest**, played in festivals and toured as far as Canada. Then, in 2020, she brought it all together under this one name, Justine Blue. A first EP was the opportunity to discover the album's team: “*I met Neil Conti six years ago, I went to do my EP at his place, with Jeff Fernandez, his sound engineer, who is excellent. I loved this pairing and so I came back. In the meantime, I also jammed on stage with Lazy Sundaze, Neil's supergroup that played in a club every Sunday, like he did in London, with the best musicians from the region and from England coming to improvise under his direction. For the album, as Neil is English, I took advantage of it, if there was a little problem with my lyrics, or with the*

pronunciation. We also did the choir arrangements together, and he played percussion and drove the drummer.” And all this can be heard! Few French bands play this music so naturally. And very few of our female singers have such a good command of their voices and lyrics in English.

Now, on this album, the blues is just a backdrop. We navigate between jazz (“**What Am I To Do**”), funk (“**No Filter**” with its perfect phrasing, on the borders of rap), soul (“**Rock Me Baby**”) and soulful ballads (“**It Makes Me Feel Alright**” and its divine brass, “**I Thought I Was Alone**” and its sublime acrobatic melody, another hit in the making).

There is even a live studio track, “**B.B.B.B. (Bye Bye Big Bad Blues)**”, a hallucinating three-way improvisation (guitar, drums, vocals), absolutely enjoyable, which gives a good idea of the abilities of the singer and her band on stage, where, at ease as fish in water, they regularly win the day, to the great delight of the enchanted spectators: specialists or not, everyone is carried away.

The record concludes with a very moving song, a perfect finale – embellished by an absolutely heavenly guitar solo, as if David Gilmour were launching into a jazz improvisation –, “**Fallin**”, whose theme is particularly touching for Justine: *“Seeing people sleeping outside is something that shocks me. The fact that I sang in the street made me aware of this, of course. There are festive encounters, where it is more of a choice, a life experience, a dramatization, or an escape, from the family, from the cocoon, a voluntary hardening. But for others, it's really decrepitude, everything was fine, it was hanging on by a thread and it cracked. They are often very sensitive people. I wanted to talk about it. It is this sensitivity that makes us live, that makes art, relationships, life.”*

Stan Cuesta