

Hard to Pin Down:

New releases by KRS-One and Brenda Russell By Tony Green**KRS-One***A Retrospective*
(Jive)

KRS-One's wildly contradictory and often half-baked proclamations have earned him his share of critical barbs. Sometimes when an artist changes so much, critics that are only comfortable with someone they can sum up in one sentence get put off.

That said, bad press never diminished his legendary status. First off, thematic consistency and philosophical authenticity aren't prerequisites for pop stardom. And his declaration "I am hip-hop" can simply be seen as his way of interpreting his career. Just as hip-hop is a mass of conflicting, divergent approaches, KRS-One's career has included phases of philosophy and gangsterism, self-reflection and opaqueness.

Even shaved down to its essentials, as it is on this 16-track best-of collection, KRS-One's body of work exhibits more variety (not to mention more beats-n-rhyme skills) than most artists can hope to achieve in three careers. Prototypical beef/boast tunes like "South Bronx" and "The Bridge Is Over" (where he scorches rivals like MC Shan and Marley Marl, not to mention the entire borough of Queens) contrast the cautionary, self-reflective "Love's Gonna Getcha." His social commentary could be silly—see the safe sex advisory "Jimmy"—or deadly serious, as on "Black Cop" and "Sound of the Police." And even though he has gone overboard on the didactic side, tunes like "Why Is That" and "You Must Learn" are rap benchmarks. KRS is one of the few rappers whose tracks have heft—you can still get on the radio by covering "I'm Still #1." KRS is an artist who, through force of will and skill, has alloyed his towering flaws and strengths into an overpowering, house-rocking whole.

**Brenda Russell***Paris Rain*
(Hidden Beach Recordings)

I once got into a discussion with a noted jazz musician about "smooth jazz." He pointed out that smooth jazz was not bad per se; just miscast—much of it was actually fairly good R&B/pop, sans singer (and song, for that matter). Calling it jazz was a disservice not just to jazz, but to itself.

Grammy-nominated Brenda Russell, for example, is a massively accomplished singer-songwriter whose jazz fluency and high-octane musicianship place her out of the pop category in many minds. Which is a shame, because Russell has been producing some flat-out gorgeous pop music for years. Remember '80s tunes like "Piano in the Dark"? (And no, Luther Vandross didn't write "If Only for One Night.") But in a world where pop/R&B sophistication means knowing more chord changes than Sisqo (Brian McKnight, Eric Benet and Kenny Lattimore excepted), using live musicians and having an expressive set of pipes makes you a hardcore jazzier.

Russell's latest, *Paris Rain*, is like most of her others—a model of near flawless pop consistency. Aided by top-shelf band members (drummer Vinny Colaiuta, percussionist Paulhino DeCosta, bassist Jimmy Haislip), Russell waxes poetic on the disc-opening "Ideal World," channels Afro-Brasilia on "She's In Love" and "Please Felipe," then gets mellow with the smoky disc closer "Baby Eyes." The range of material demonstrates this artist's formidable skills, which, after nearly 20 solo years, show no signs of diminishing. •



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