

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

The Portland Observer

Brian McKnight, A Voice Close To Our Soul

Of all the instruments, the voice is the most haunting, the most expressive. The voice is the sound closest to our soul. We remember voices with chilling recall. The voice of a lover echoes in our ear long after the love is gone. Inner voices confuse or soothe, filling our head with hope, disappointment, joy.

The voice of the singer is the most memorable of all—the singer who captures the power of raw feelings; the singer who discloses the elusive longing that lingers in our dreams; the singer whose sensitivity touches our heart and excites our imagination.

Brian McKnight is such a singer. His gift is enormous. Beyond the sheer marvel of this voice, his bril-



Brian McKnight.

liance as a writer, musician and producer place him in an exceptional category. His immediate predecessors are Donny Hathaway and Stevie Wonder, two other keyboard-based vocalists whose musical visions are architectural in scope. Like McKnight's their songs blend structural complexity and emotional simplicity they're deep but direct, solid but soaring. Most immediately, their voices remain with us through the bright days and dark nights of our lives. Their voices are unique.

Here, in the middle of the nineties, Brian McKnight's second album is a particular pleasure. If Brian helped usher in a return to romanticism with his debut three years ago, he rein-

forces that commitment with I remember You. The theme of romance in McKnight's hands, however, is sculpted along unusual lines.

The supple, brooding quality of his voice -- at once hypnotic and surprising -- seems to suggest a love never quite realized. A hunger remains. The compelling quest, felt in the flow of his seductive grooves, goes on and on.

One song streams into another. Love sought, love lost love regretted or remembered -- love remains in the mist, the wonder behind the melody, the mystery behind Brian's lush harmonies.

The voices all belong to Brian; as singer and instrumentalist, he is his

own accompanist. Watching him work the studio, you feel the intensity of his focus. At 3PM, he has nothing but a sketchy idea, strummed on acoustic guitar, tinkered on piano. By 9 PM, the idea is now a song, mastered on tape, complete with rhythm tracks and finished vocals. In six hours, McKnight has built and layered his music with a heady mixture of exquisite delicacy and muscular energy. He moves from instrument to instrument, from the control board to the vocal booth and back, seamlessly stitching a tapestry whose design is nothing short of dazzling.

Ask him a question during the process and you'll get a one word reply, if any. He won't be distracted.

Grateful Dead Fans Mourn Death

Grateful Dead fans, devoted with almost religious fervor to the veteran rock band, are in mourning for legendary singer and guitarist Jerry Garcia, who died at a drug treatment center of an apparent heart attack.

Hundreds of people held vigils around the United States last week, listening to the Grateful Dead's music and remembering Garcia, leader and inspiration of the band that is an icon of the psychedelic 1960s.

Garcia, who had a history of drug use, weight problems and poor health, was found dead early on Wednesday at a drug and alcohol treatment center near San Francisco, where he had checked in a few days

earlier. A band spokesman said the cause was believed to be a heart attack. He was 53.

Stunned fans wept and hugged each other in San Francisco, and many said that the loss of Garcia, a bear-like man with untidy grey hair and beard, left a gaping hole in their lives. Some said his death, which puts a question mark over the Grateful Dead's future, meant the 1960s were finally over.

"The Dead are the closest thing to a religion that I have," a woman at the San Francisco gathering said.

Garcia was one of the founders of the Grateful Dead, whose mixture day night to remember Garcia while

in Los Angeles, hundreds of Grateful Dead fans gathered in Griffith Park for a candlelight vigil.

Tributes to Garcia poured in from music stars like Bob Dylan and Carlos Santana and from politicians and fans such as Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy.

Flags in San Francisco flew at half-staff. Department stores in San Francisco reported customers were snapping up a range of silk ties with designs by Garcia, with some buying five or six at a time.

Born Jerome John Garcia in San Francisco in 1942, Garcia dropped out of high school at 17 and worked as a salesman and music teacher in

California before forming the Warlocks rock group in 1965, which became the Grateful Dead a year later.

He was arrested on heroin and cocaine possession charges in 1985 and almost died a year later when he fell into a diabetic coma brought on by drug use.

The group's most famous songs include "Truckin,'" "Casey Jones" and "Friend of the Devil" but it is more famous for its live shows, which gross tens of millions of dollars a year.

Garcia is survived by his third wife, Carolyn Koons, and by four daughters.

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