

## ● HIP-HOP

### BLITZ THE AMBASSADOR

**Stereotype**

Embassy/MGMT

★★★½

Jazz-based hip-hop has been around for more than 20 years. Whether it was the sample-based sounds of Gang Starr and A Tribe Called Quest or the live instrumentation of The Roots, jazz music figured prominently in the development of hip-hop music and culture. But while modern rap trends favor drum machines and synthesizers, Blitz the Ambassador's *Stereotype* is out to kill preconceived notions about the genre. Armed with an iconic and symbolic album cover showing a boombox committing suicide, the mostly instrumental *Prelude* sets the experience off: Fiercely plucked upright bass, moody electric piano chords and warm horn arrangements introduce listeners to a powerful album dominated by in-your-face political raps and impressive, complex musical arrangements.

Blitz, born in Ghana and educated in the United States, brings a worldly political perspective that, paired with his gruff voice, is reminiscent of Public Enemy's Chuck D. He tackles African poverty and American consumerism in *Something to Believe*, Hurricane Katrina and Iraq in the smooth sax-dominated *Home*, and slavery in the Spanish guitar-tinged *Ghetto Plantation*.

Musically, *Stereotype* is just as worldly and layered as its subject matter: The seven-minute *Remembering the Future* weaves syncopated drums and dense horn arrangements, while the funky *Breathe* is a danceable jam blending cymbal-heavy drumming, blues guitar and swirling trumpets.

*Stereotype* proves Blitz the Ambassador is a force to be reckoned with: Between his fiery rhymes and co-production with beatmaker Optiks, he proves to be a well-rounded musician unafraid to take hip-hop in a different direction.

— ADRIAN RUHI  
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This is not music for the faint of heart.

"I confess I'm a mess, and I'm trying to catch up with life," the singer-songwriter shouts over high-flying horns on *Runnin'*. It's the opening salvo as she charges through a mix of rock, blues, classic soul, funk, hip-hop and traditional R&B with the intensity of a fired-up evangelist and dares you to keep up.

Ledisi's debut Verve release, *Lost & Found* won critical acclaim, including a 2007 Grammy Best New Artist nomination, and her strong, soulful performances have inspired comparisons to Jill Scott and Lauryn Hill. For the follow-up, she chooses a bolder approach, aiming to capture the energy and passion that have characterized her stage shows for years.

Straddling genres could prove troublesome for a lesser singer, but the classically trained Ledisi proves herself a master of every domain and mostly works the unpredictability to her advantage. She excels on the jazzy *Say No* and displays her incredible vocal agility backed by drums and strings on *I Need Love*.

After guitar riffs kick off the bluesy testimonial *Knockin'*, you

much for those who prefer straight-up R&B, but she maintains a devotion to an evolving artistry that her fans have come to expect.

— WILLIAM T. MCGEE  
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## ● POP

### MINDY SMITH *Stupid Love*

Vanguard

★★★

Mindy Smith, whose 2004 debut spawned the country hit *Come to Jesus*, is a model of restraint. The Nashville-based singer-songwriter has a lovely, pure soprano. She ascends to a girlish high register for her soft ballads — it's no wonder that Alison Krauss has covered her songs — and she roughens it, slightly, for the occasional midtempo, twangy tune. But she never loses her cool. *Stupid Love*, Smith's fourth album, including an excellent Christmas record, is unfailingly pleasant and often beautiful.

Ranging from the sparse, introspective *I'm Disappointed* to the rolling, high-spirited *What Went Wrong* to the soaring, string-kissed *Couldn't Stand*