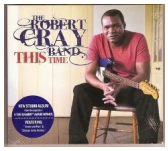
## The Robert Cray Band - This Time (2009)




*01 Chicken in the Kitchen 02 I Can't Fail 03 I Love 2009 04 That's What Keeps Me Rockin' 05 This Time 06 To Be True 07 Forever Goodbye 08 Trouble & Pain 09 Truce* Personnel: Robert Cray - Vocals and guitar Jim Pugh - Keyboards Richard Cousins - Bass guitar Tony Braunagel - Drums

In the early 1980s, Robert Cray burst onto the blues revival scene, taking his place among heavy hitters like Eric Clapton as a young blues prophet in the mainstream market. But that was a long time ago, and Cray's recent efforts haven't been quite as successful. While he could always be counted on for a reliable blues number or a soulful standard, much of that early fire seems to have been lost in the past decade. This Time is his first studio record in five years, and while the man himself might not have much to prove, it couldn't help to deliver a back-to-form tribute to the blues.

Which isn't exactly what Robert Cray does. Instead This Time is a blues-inspired album that, while it's good fun, won't exactly keep you coming back for more. Perhaps it's telling that This Time is being released by Vanguard Records, the go-to place for blues and jazz reissues, because it's not an album that takes any steps forward. There's no question that Cray's voice is as strong as it's ever been, but his sound absolutely refuses to progress.

While his vocals might define Cray's sound, he remains a solid and impressive guitar player, particularly on numbers like "I Can't Fail", which allow his slow-and-steady approach to lead the way. And while the soulful title track might be somewhat overlong (clocking in at over seven minutes), it has plenty of swagger to spare. It's easily the best of Cray's more soul-inspired numbers on this album, as it combines a smoky rhythm with a remarkable vocal performance. Even the lighthearted opener, "Chicken in the Kitchen", with its overtures to classic Delta blues and traditional melody, is a real standout.

But the treacly “To Be True” falls far below Cray’s talents and hits a sour note that remains for the second half of the album. The Otis Redding vibe on “Forever Goodbye” just shows why Cray, though he does soul well, does blues so much better. It’s why “That’s What Keeps Me Rockin’” is so much stronger than “Truce”, why Cray at his lightest is also Cray at his strongest. “Truce” makes for a poor closing number for an album that goes in like a lion and out like a lamb.

It’s a tough balancing act for an artist who’s been in the business for over thirty years. If you don’t change, you get left behind. Change too much, and you alienate the very people that got you to the top. Cray isn’t exactly an innovator, and you don’t turn to soulful blues or bluesy soul to get a musical reinvention. But a little experimentation can do wonders for an artist, especially one who’s been in the business as long as Cray has. Those looking for a solid, soul-tinged set of songs will enjoy this set. Those asking for something more will be disappointed. ---Emily Tartanella, popmatters.com

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