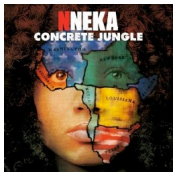
Nneka - Concrete Jungle (2010)



01. Showin' Love 02. The Uncomfortable Truth 03. Mind Vs. Heart 04. Heartbeat play
05. Come With Me 06. Kangpe (feat. Wesley Williams) 07. Africans 08. Suffri 09. From Africa 2 U 10. Walking
play
11. Focus 12. God Of Mercy
Nneka Egbuna Composer, Drawing, Guitar (Acoustic), Photography, Producer Ecko Alabi Drums Nis Kötting Keyboards Gros Ngollé Pokossi Bass Farhad Samadzada Keyboards, Mixing, Programming Jean-Louis Solans Bass, Guitar, Palmas Juergen Spiegel Drums Sven Waje Bass, Composer, Guitar, Programming

Concrete Jungle, a compilation of tracks from Nneka's first two European albums -- eight are taken from 2008's No Longer at Ease; four from her 2005 debut Victim of Truth --serves as her introduction to American audiences. The child of a Nigerian (Igbo) father and a German mother who divides her time between Hamburg and Lagos, but takes most of her musical inspiration from American hip-hop and soul (and Jamaican reggae), Nneka comes across perhaps all too readily as an emblematic figure, an embodiment of certain familiar Pan-African tropes. Her compelling personal story seems to encapsulate many of the complexities and contradictions of African diasporic history, while her heterogeneous mix of funk, reggae, rap, R&B, Afro-beat, and pop feels like textbook culture-fusing eclecticism. The cover of Concrete Jungle seems designed to cast the singer as a sort of rainbow-hued "Mama Africa," superimposing her solemn face with a multi-colored map of the continent, curiously mislabeled with American state names (although it does downplay her impressively expansive afro.) It's an attractive reading and an apt persona, and Nneka does it some justice, although it obscures the extent to which she's a unique artist drawing on a singular set of life experiences which don't fit into a pat, familiar narrative. Still, the ambitious array of styles here does make it hard to put a finger on Nneka's distinct identity. There is a palpable (decidedly old-school) hip-hop undercurrent throughout, despite the lack of any traditionally styled boom-bap beats, and even though Nneka really only flexes her (entirely respectable) rap skills on two cuts (the somewhat gritty "Showin' Love" and the bombastic, rock guitar-fueled "Focus"), "Africans" and "Kangpe" both offer fairly straight-ahead reggae vibes -- authentically roots-flavored and mildly updated, respectively --

but beyond that, the grooves are truly all over the map: "Uncomfortable Truth" is a horn-heavy 6/8 funk shuffle; "From Africa 2 U" is bubbly highlife-styled Afro-pop; "Walking" and "God of Mercy" nod towards Massive Attack's soulful brand of trip-hop; "Come with Me" is a bluesy acoustic number that calls to mind Tracy Chapman; "Heartbeat" (a 2009 Top 20 hit in the U.K.) is a tense, modern pop confection with buzzing strings and hyperactive double-time drums. On paper it sounds like a disjointed mess, even if there are certainly interconnections linking most of these styles, but somehow Nneka (along with her primary musical collaborator and producer, DJ Farhot) manage to make these disparate tracks succeed not only individually, but as a generally cohesive whole. Among the common elements tying it all together -- apart from Nneka's slightly grainy voice, which is thin but versatile and potent -- are a consistently organic sound palette (there are almost no overtly electronic elements), and a frequent political edge that's galvanizing without being aggressively militant, and remains uplifting while rarely lapsing into platitudes. Comparisons to the adventurous, populist neo-soul divas of the '90s -- in particular Erykah Badu and Lauryn Hill -- are both inevitable and absolutely warranted, which helps explain why Nneka's music sounds so refreshingly out of step: just about nobody (not even the revitalized Badu) is making music in this vein anymore with this level of intelligence, warmth, and accessibility. ---K. Ross Hoffman, AllMusic Review

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