Leona Lewis - Echo (2009)



1. Happy
2. I Got You
3. Cant Breathe
4. Brave
5. Outta My Head
6. My Hands
7. Love Letter
8. Broken
9. Naked
10. Stop Crying Your Heart Out
11. Don Let Me Down
12. Alive
13. Lost Then Found (Featuring OneRepublic)

One begins listening to this second album from the 2006 X Factor winner hoping its title isn't prophetic – nobody needs an echo of Lewis's soporific, saccharine debut, Spirit.

While her 2007 album remains the fastest-selling debut release from a British artist – it outsold the Spice Girls' greatest hits compilation by two to one – Spirit offered little beyond the anticipated. An assortment of big-lunged ballads, replete with lyrics about overcoming adversity, it ticked all necessary boxes and met audience expectations disappointingly perfectly.

More is expected of this 13-track set, which hasn't quite hit the ground running as its lead single, Happy, failed to set charts alight internationally (though it's sure to perform better

domestically). Recorded stateside over the course of nine months, Echo is undeniably a bolder affair than its predecessor, but still falls into the same trap of an over reliance on Lewis's voice – not half as strong as her supporters might think – in favour of developed arrangements musically muscular enough to render attentions rapt.

When she reaches for the highs, Lewis comes off as a discount Mariah Carey – Can't Breathe is an unbearable exercise in vocal histrionics that will have all but the most fiercely loyal of devotees reaching for a bucket. Its staccato tics might briefly recall the addictive "'ella, 'ella, 'ella" motif of Rihanna's Umbrella, but it lacks any of the Barbadian singer's sassiness and compositional edge. Better are the Arabic overtones of Brave, but it's still more straight-to-DVD Disney than DreamWorks blockbuster in scope.

The employment of an assortment of co-writers, including Justin Timberlake and OneRepublic's Ryan Tedder, hasn't resulted in an album of pronounced diversity. With only a couple of exceptions, Echo sticks to safe songs that complement their singer's ballad-heavy catalogue. Outta My Head is a sidestep into cheesy Eurodance beats that almost comes off – it's a touch too cheap-sounding, too tinny of production – and the Timberlake duet Don't Let Me Down shuffles to subtle percussion evocative of the American singer's Cry Me a River and What Goes Around…, albeit without any comparable soulfulness.

Echo's problem is that its central protagonist simply doesn't stamp her authority on proceedings – yes, that's her dominating the mix, but there's no character in her performances, no life in her voice beyond that prompted by out-of-shot puppeteers. Its songs are fine for what they are, and clear improvements on what came before. But for a multi-million selling artist, Lewis still lacks an album worthy of her international profile. ---Mike Driver, BBC Review

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