Angelique Kidjo - Spirit Rising (2012)

1. Tumba 2. Afrika 3. Redemption Song 4. Agolo 5. Gimme Sheltre (with Dianne Reeves) 6. Malaika 7. Summertime 8. Batonga 9. Pearls (with Josh Groban) 10. Kdele 11. Move On Up (with Branford Marsalis) 12. I Think UR a Contra (with Ezra Koenig) 13. Lonlon - Ravel's Bolero (with Branford Marsalis) 14. Monfe Ran E (with Dianne Reeves) 15. Senamou 16. N'Yin Wan Nou We

Although documenting the current state of Angélique Kidjo's stage show, her first live album also acts as an alternative greatest hits selection. The bounding, charismatic singer from Benin has been increasingly active on the touring circuit in recent years, whether solo, or as part of her Sing the Truth! collaboration with fellow vocalists Dianne Reeves and Lizz Wright.

Spirit Rising was recorded live in Boston by PBS, hopping around from Kidjo's oldest signature numbers to a clutch of diverse cover versions, interpreted with a swift flow of guest stars. The band operates as a solidly balanced wall of Afro-pop brashness, but there are still speedy flurries designed to spotlight bass, percussion, guitar or piano, even if these outbreaks are just as swiftly dispatched. The prime focus is the songs themselves, and Kidjo's always absolutely central vocal, invariably as rhythmic and punchy as the surrounding drum work.

Any Kidjo performance is always inflated by her natural exuberance, and this quality is carried across by the recording. If ever a festival is flagging, Kidjo can reinvigorate its crowds. Afrika and Agolo are the best-known songs from her old repertoire, and they appear here in sleekly dashing form.

Dianne Reeves guests on two songs, particularly shining on the Afro-stomp reading of Gimme

Shelter, before filling Monfe Ran E with gospel-soul emoting. Some of the other covers are less successful, partially due to an unimaginative selection of over-familiar works. Hence Redemption Song, which has lately become a most fashionable Bob Marley choice. Curtis Mayfield's Move On Up is invigorated by the guesting saxophonist Branford Marsalis, but Summertime is another overdone ditty, and Ravel's Bolero even more so, as Kidjo enunciates its rhythms in such a closely-shadowing manner. It's the opposite of scatting subtlety. When Senamou kicks in towards the end, it's clear to see that this typically pan-African propulsion is where Kidjo's best work lies. ---Martin Longley, BBC Review

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