

Jack McManus Biography – November 2007

Jack McManus is heading up the stairs of an old-time theatre in South London that was once owned by Charlie Chaplin. It's all flaking paint and musty carpets, and when Jack lets slip that the place is reputedly haunted by one of Chaplin's leading ladies, it's all too believable.

A windowless former office at the top was where Jack's debut album, *Either Side Of Midnight*, first began to take shape. It was possibly helped along by the resident ghost, who – if she had any appreciation of music at all – must have been twitching with ectoplasmic delight. The reason is clear as soon as you press Play: Jack McManus writes songs like an old soul. That's to say, they have the richness and, well, bigness, you'd expect of someone who's been alive for much longer than 23 years. If you wanted to go out on a limb, you could call them future classics. But since Jack was only born in 1984, there's also an exuberant edge that stops them from being too damned perfect.

To begin in the middle, Jack – straight outta Bromley, Kent – originally wanted to be a tennis player (“I played for Kent, and represented Great Britain in an international tournament”), but came to his senses when he got into the Brit School of Performing Arts. He qualified on the strength of his trumpet-playing – he'd started at eight years old – and assumed he would end up in an orchestra. The path he's taken instead isn't surprising, when you consider who he went to school with; Amy Winehouse was in his year, and Luke “the Kook” Pritchard was the year below.

Having said that, pop is clearly in the McManus DNA; his dad supplied pyrotechnics for big rock acts, and accompanied several on the road. McManus senior worked on, among others, Pink Floyd's “The Wall” tour, before retiring to the less explosive life of a private-party DJ. Jack went along to gigs, and when Dad found an abandoned drum kit in the pyro factory, his seven-year-old son decided to learn to play it. The drums were followed by piano, then trumpet. By the time he arrived at the Brit School, he was virtually a one-man band.

Jack's Brit years awakened him to R&B, soul and funk, none of which he'd heard much of before. Suddenly he was exposed to a world of influences and that mix is what set him on his music-making path. That and an unshakeable appreciation of the power of a big pop song: “I was brought up on classic pop and growing up in Bromley I got to see – and feel - the reaction a big song could have at the end of the night in the local club. I've never forgotten that.”

When he left school, Jack temporarily reverted to what he knew best, and got a job playing trumpet in the band of the musical “125th Street,” which was playing in the West End. “The job included being second understudy to the role of a New York City policeman. I had four lines in an American accent,” he winces. “I was terrible, but I ended up going on 25 times.”

When his “acting” stint ended, there was time to focus on his music. Through a friend, he found the writing-space in Charlie Chaplin's theatre. He brought his trumpet along, using it to compose melody lines, and found himself drawn toward a “Seventies vibe” inspired by the classic songwriters of that decade: Elton John, Billy Joel, Tom Petty. (Jack's mad hair, which he used to hate, is also a kind of tribute to that era.)

Originally the plan was to write his melodies for other people, because singing them himself was outside Jack's comfort zone. “It was only when I went to publishers with my demos, and they assumed I was going to be performing them, that I thought of myself as a singer. Now I wouldn't want to do anything else.”

Jack co-wrote ‘From The Rooftops’ with Groove Armada for their *Soundboy Rock* album, and a spacey version of his vocal propels the finished track on its Erik Satie-ish path. The warmth of his voice comes across best, though, with a simpler treatment. Either live (a forthcoming tour with *Scouting For Girls* follows his own acoustic shows) or – naturally enough - on “*Either Side Of Midnight*”. It's an instantly-accessible, refreshingly “up” album, as evidenced by the joyous first single “*Bang On The Piano*”. Other highlights are similarly cathartic, including the beautiful piano ballad “*Fine Time To Lose Your Mind*,” which was inspired by a rough patch in his life, and the album's title track “*Either Side of Midnight*,” which recalls the glorious pop of the Alessi Brothers.

It really is as simple as that: *Either Side Of Midnight* is an album of gorgeous, memorable tunes sung by the only person who could sing them. Think the archetypal singer-songwriter is a doomy misfit? Meet the exception to the rule.