

The Other First Lady

Candi Staton's last two albums confirm her right to the crown of southern soul, says **GEORGE BYRNE**

FOR SEVERAL YEARS NOW we've seen the gradual closure of smaller, more intimate record shops as more punters buy their music via Amazon or simply download digital signals on to their computers, never making physical contact with their purchases.

Dublin is a much poorer place without the likes of Record Collector, Comet and Road, and one thing those shops offered the music fan was the regular thrill of discovering an artist you'd never previously encountered, thanks to the whim of one of the staff. It was in a now-gone store in Edinburgh

Young Man's Fool) in my hands.

Now, I'll have to 'fess up here and admit that, like many of you, my only real knowledge of Candi Staton at that point was as the singer of the great disco hits *Young Hearts Run Free* and *Nights on Broadway*, but this compilation of her early work for Capitol (reissued by Honest Jon's Records) was a revelation. Here was a classic melting pot of the great strands of American music, with gospel, soul, country and R'n'B (when it stood for rhythm'n'blues rather than rapping'n'bling) coming together in a divine package and fronted by a woman

whose voice may have been formed and honed in church but whose delivery spoke volumes about a life experienced.

Staton's voice cut through the sympathetic arrangements (courtesy of the mighty musicians at Muscle Shoals studio in Alabama) with maximum effect yet minimum fuss. Unlike the contemporary trend for vocal gymnastics, Staton — like her contemporaries Ann Peebles and the divine Aretha — knew that the feel of a song was paramount and that once the necessary note was hit, it stayed hit and there was no need to warble around it.

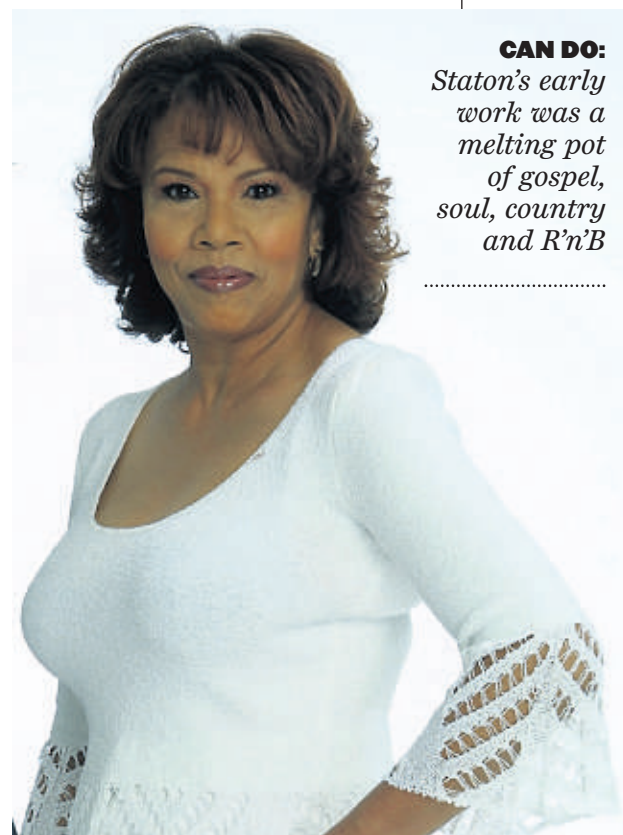
The country element — a touch of Ray

Charles in reverse, you might say — comes to the fore on covers of *Stand By Your Man* and *In The Ghetto* (a version so impressive that Elvis himself contacted Staton to compliment her on it), but really this is simply great music, full stop.

It's not for nothing that Candi Staton was dubbed 'the First Lady of southern soul' and although she stepped back from secular music in the 1980s to concentrate on her first love (gospel), in the past three years she's released two albums, *His Hands* and the recent *Who's Hurting Now?*, which confirm that the crown is hers for the taking whenever she chooses.

Candi Staton plays in Whelan's tonight

CAN DO: Staton's early work was a melting pot of gospel, soul, country and R'n'B



one morning several years ago that I wandered, bleary-eyed, when a wonderful, funky soul stew of a song stopped me in my tracks and lifted my mood immediately. "What's that?" I asked the bloke behind the counter and, as he handed me the sleeve of the CD in question, he turned to his younger assistant and said "Ysee? Never, ever underestimate the power of in-store playing." Too damn right.

The album in question cost the unbelievably low sum of five of Her Majesty's pounds sterling but, if I'm being honest, I'd have gladly paid five times that much just to walk out of there with Candi Staton's *I'd Rather Be An Old Man's Sweetheart* (Than a

WRITTEN DOWN: Sean says some people feel sorry for him



NEW SONGS OF OLD

Sean Millar's new EP has the slow-brewed reflections of a wizened, steadfast old-timer

WE'RE TERRIBLE EEJITS IN THIS COUNTRY," sings Sean Millar on a track from his new EP, *Of The People's — Part One*. The song, a claustrophobic urban voodoo incantation, is called *Back In Dublin City When The Fix Was In*. Given the questionable stuff that's happening with the banks, it sounds as if Sean, the artist formerly known as Doctor Millar, might have written the song yesterday. Not so.

"I've been working on these songs for years," he says. "I kind of saw the way things were going. It was just a response to that. Ireland seemed to be moving in a very alienating way. I wanted to write songs that reflected that. And also write about things I thought were good about Ireland as well."

Millar has a cult following. As a performer, he's recorded three critically-acclaimed albums. As a producer he's worked on Nick Kelly's impressive *Running Dog* album. And he's also played a supporting role alongside Glen Hansard in the Oscar-winning *Once*.

Now in his 40s, he's to be the subject of an upcoming documentary which is being produced under the working title *Doc Doc*. The man a *Le Monde* reviewer has described as "the greatest living Irish songwriter" has been writing notable songs since the 80s, when he performed with his band, The Cute Hoors. He hasn't lost any of his enthusiasm. Or razor sharp powers of observation.

"When I was 28 I remember thinking, 'I'm hopelessly old now to be a musician,'" he reveals. "I'd started playing music when I was a teenager. I feel that as an industry, music has lost where it is. There's not much in it. I have a phrase, 'I can't see Elvis'. I don't see anyone of that importance or depth."

But Millar's got a tale to tell. "I seem to have managed that when people look back at what I did, they don't think it's all terrible," he says modestly. "So I'm delighted about the young kids making the documentary. They approached me about it a while back. When we met I explained that if I was going to be involved in this I wanted it to be some kind of collaborative thing. They were great. They're positive and funny. It should be a laugh."

But Sean has started to notice something weird happening. "I sometimes talk to people and they do a thing where they start to almost feel a bit sorry for me," he laughs. "But I say, 'Look, my life is really good'. I've done, by my own lights, very well. I work with music every day and I feel blessed that that's the way things have worked out for me." — **EC**

Sean Millar plays live at Bewley's Cafe Theatre on Wednesday 18th