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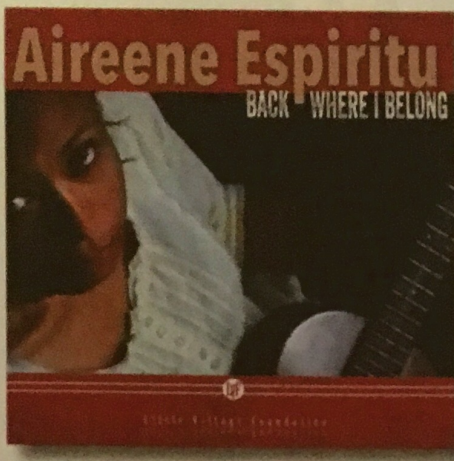
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AIREENE ESPIRITU

Back Where I Belong

Little Village Foundation – LVF 1006

Although they are about 40 years apart in age, ukulele-playing folksinger Aireene Espiritu and veteran R&B singer-songwriter Sugar Pie DeSanto have a number of things in common. Both are of Filipino heritage. Espiritu was born in the Philippines and came to California when she was ten. DeSanto was born 80 years ago in Brooklyn to a Filipino father and African American mother and came to San Francisco as an infant. Both now live in Oakland, and each stands 4'11" and weighs 90 pounds.

Espiritu was one of some 200 artists who appeared at a folk music conference in Oakland in 2014 that was attended by former Robert Cray and Etta James keyboardist Jim Pugh. Her repertoire included original songs—one was about the murder of Trayvon Martin—Filipino folk and pop tunes, Negro spirituals and numbers by Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie and Bessie Smith. Pugh began thinking about producing her for his soon-to-be-launched nonprofit Little Village Foundation label and having her do tunes previously recorded by and mostly composed by DeSanto.

What began as a rather wild dream turned out to be a wonderful work of art, with Espiritu applying her strong, emotion-dripping alto pipes to seven songs that had been recorded by DeSanto. Espiritu avoided such obvious choices as the hits *I Want to Know* and *Slip-In Mules* in favor of lesser-known numbers like *Going Back Where I Belong* (on which Espiritu harmonizes with co-producer Kid Andersen's wife, onetime "American Idol" contestant Lisa Leuschner, much as DeSanto had double-tracked her own voice Patti Page-style on the 1960 original).

the lovely mid-tempo soul ballad *My Illusions* and a torrid rocker titled *Witch for a Night* (first recorded by DeSanto in Chicago in the '60s but not released until 2009).

Guitarist Andersen, organist-pianist Pugh and a large cast of session players, anchored by bassist Steve Evans and drummer June Core, retain the '60s flavor of DeSanto's original recordings for the most part. One notable exception is the soul ballad *Life Goes on Just the Same*. Instead of using strings as Maxine Brown had on her original 1962 version and DeSanto did 42 years later, Espiritu and company brilliantly transform the Bennie Benjamin-Sol Marcus composition into a blues-with-a-bridge with just a piano, acoustic guitar and the harmonica of Filipino American Carlos Zialcita providing support for the singer.

The remaining six tracks have no DeSanto connections. Espiritu gives an especially tender reading to the obscure 1969 Bobby Bland blues ballad *Ask Me 'Bout Noting (But the Blues)*, with Andersen playing subtle obligatos in his best Wayne Bennett manner. Rounding out the set are the spirituals *No More* and *Down By the Riverside* and three Filipino numbers, including *Bayan Ko*, a lilting freedom song that found popularity during the dictatorial reign of Ferdinand Marcos.

—Lee Hildebrand

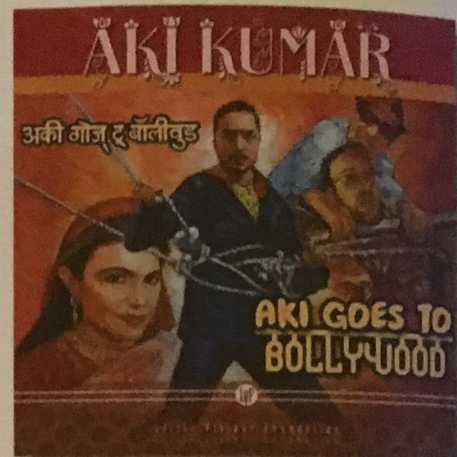
AKI KUMAR

Aki Goes to Bollywood

Little Village Foundation – LVF 1008

Mumbai, India, and Chicago, Illinois, are half a world apart geographically. Musically, the lively soundtracks of Mumbai's Bollywood film industry and the blues of Chicago might even seem planets apart. Somehow, though, Mumbai-bred, San Jose, California-based vocalist and harmonica virtuoso Aki Kumar has combined the two disparate genres in an unforced musical fusion never before attempted and has pulled it off with breathtaking aplomb.

Kumar's ringing tenor pipes are powerful as he applies them to the 11 songs on *Aki Goes to Bollywood*—nine sung in Hindi, two in English—backed by a Chicago-style blues band lead by guitarist Kid Andersen and keyboardist Jim Pugh (the disc's co-producers) and including drummer June Core, alternating bassists Vance Ehlers and Joe Kyle Jr. and tenor saxophonist Eric Spaulding. Many selections ingeniously match Hindi melodies, none of them 12-bar blues, to instrumental patterns



drawn from classic Chicago blues songs. Driven by a *Wang Dang Doodle*-like beat, the set-opening *Badan Pe Sitaare* includes a Hubert Sumlin-like solo by Andersen that at first sounds like it's being played on guitar until the fact quickly sinks in that it's actually a sitar. On the four-bar introduction to the slow blues *My Home Is a Prison*, Andersen uses the sitar in a way similar to how Muddy Waters used his slide guitar.

"Ah, play it Sitar Slim," Kumar commands at the onset of Andersen's solo on the song, which is hauntingly underpinned by the drone of Pugh's harmonium. Kumar follows with a commanding multi-octave harmonica chorus of his own.

On the other English language number, *Back to Bombay*, Kumar wails, "If I don't make it to Bombay, send me down to Mexico. You know them brown-skin women make me feel right at home," over a *Rollin' and Tumblin'* groove. After a wordlessly moaned vocal chorus, he takes the tune out on acoustic harmonica with a vamp during which he quotes from the melody of the naughty children's song about "a place in France where naked ladies dance," following by a Sonny Terry-like train whistle.

—Lee Hildebrand

GREGG MARTINEZ

Soul of the Bayou

Louisiana Red Hot Records – LRS-
CD-1181

Gregg Martinez's "swamp pop" brand of R&B found on *Soul of the Bayou*, his 11th studio album, places the emphasis on the "pop" side of the equation as he turns a program of three originals and covers of (mostly) classic soul tunes. When you think "swamp," the slick.