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LeRoy Bell, "Two Sides to Every Story," Martez Music MTZM0602, 2006

You've heard LeRoy Bell before, you just didn't realize it. As a member of the songwriting team and recording act Bell & James, the artist has co-authored hits for Sir Elton John (the Grammy nominated "Mama Can't But You Love," and UK #1 "Are You Ready For Love"). And along with his uncle, noted producer Thom Bell, he's written for such legendary artists as The Spinners, O'Jays, Rita Marley, The Temptations, and Phyllis Hyman, to name a few. A seasoned veteran in the pop music wars, Bell exudes the spark of a new artist with passion aplenty on "Two Sides." His soulful, often gritty vocal style glides through this collection which tackles the personal, political, and social themes of the day with a decidedly upbeat attitude. By way of a simple acoustic guitar strummed dead center on the down beat, Bell offers a sturdy foundation for each track. The band (ironically dubbed "His Only Friends") play all the right notes in all the right spots too, as they embellish the singer's melodies with rich harmonies and understated counterpoint. "Voodoo" kicks off the disc with a dark, swamp groove reminiscent of the early Allman Brothers, especially when Rick Novito's slippery slide guitar surfaces in the verses. Phil Peterson's plucked cello and legato passages abet the reggae tinged "Father & Son" and his weepy intro to the Latin flavored "Mexico" blends into Bell's downtrodden tale of love lost in a sublime manner. Be sure to check out Bell's dexterous transitions in "Once Upon A Time" which afford the track an orchestral bent without the usual MOR trappings. "20 Years From Now" can't help but sound like modern -day Springsteen thanks to the ragged harmonica and Bell's chin-in-chest (it's referred to as "emo" nowadays) demeanor. Percussionist Stan White and bassist Terry Morgan come to the forefront in "I'm In Love," laying down a funky, percolating template for Novito's hypnotic figures and Petersons' sweet riffs. As a vocalist Bell intuitively breaks into a falsetto to temper his throaty wail, adding the dramatic flair that separates a good singer from a great one, of which Bell is the latter, of course.

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