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## Anthony Strong – *Stepping Out* (2013)

From the opening strokes of “Too Darn Hot,” it’s abundantly clear that Anthony Strong is the real deal. He swings hard and brims with confidence, filling *Stepping Out* with a brand of boldness that fits him like a perfect suit.

The sleek Brit sings and plays piano with captivating energy throughout the record’s mix of standards and originals. He errs on the lighter side of things, but that doesn’t mean that his exuberant horn section doesn’t blare like Las Vegas neon. Whether working through fluid ballads with the help of a lush string section or hammering through pop-inspired standards, Strong’s approach is fresh and sharp.

Born in South London, Strong caught the music bug through theatre. He won scholarships to Whitgift School and the Purcell School of Music and wound up serving as a session musician for the likes of Michael Bolton and Kyle Eastwood. Eventually, Strong earned a part for a nine-month run in *Million Dollar Quartet*. That gig earned him the praise of one Rod Stewart.

With that foundation, Strong began to focus on putting his own music out there. He hit the clubs in London and earned a reputation for showmanship. A debut record followed in the summer of 2009 and radio pick-ups led to a sell-out gig at the 2010 London Jazz Festival. And now, having signed with the naïve record label, he’s ready to hit again with *Stepping Out*.

Strong’s work on standards finds him “in the pocket,” as he would say. Consider Frank Loesser’s “Luck be a Lady,” for instance. Strong handles the intro with tight flourishes of piano to augment his tenor, but then he rolls into the bottom end and smokes it with blasts from the horn section and a rhythm that feels like it should be illegal. Thank bassist Tom Farmer and drummer Sebastien De Krom for that!

Settling into “the groove between bass and drums” finds Strong owning “Stepping Out With My Baby” in a way few performers can. His piano accents add splash, while Calum Gourlay’s bass-playing tracks the essentials with Matt Skelton’s drumming.

Strong’s own compositions, pieces like the rapid-fire “Change My Ways” and the dramatic “Someone Knows,” flesh out the repertoire and give *Stepping Out* an intoxicating balance.

Whether handling the work of Stevie Wonder and Cole Porter or swaying with his own work, Strong is undeniably charming. He is as close to a complete performer as one can get and his get-up-and-go boosts *Stepping Out* with the enthusiasm and coolness too often missing from modern vocal jazz. Pour a drink and enjoy; this is the good stuff.