

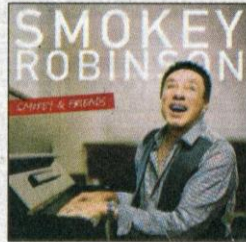
# Los Angeles Times

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## ALBUM REVIEWS



Warner Bros.



Verve

### Kimbra's layer cake of sounds and styles

**Kimbra**  
"The Golden Echo"  
Warner Bros.  
★★★

In a year in which many big-ticket records have stressed brevity and focus, there's something to be said for New Zealand pop iconoclast Kimbra's "The Golden Echo."

Best known in America for her vocals on the smash "Somebody That I Used to Know," the magnetic multi-instrumentalist on her second solo album moves through a strange and often surprising set of tones and approaches. A virtual layer cake of futuristic funk pop, contemporary R&B and maximalist Top 40 music slathered with the purple icing of Prince, "The Golden Echo" swaps styles with glee — and at times reckless — abandon.

A remarkable chameleon, at various points Kimbra swings her voice to suggest Chaka Khan, Amy Winehouse, The xx's Romy Madley Croft and Janelle Monae, and weaves her tone through music thick with structural experimentation. "Waltz Me to the Grave" is a hazy seven-minute jam suggestive of Erykah Badu; "As You Are" is a beguiling, richly composed ballad featuring arrangements by Van Dyke Parks. Bonus track "Sugar Lies" is like if Kimbra hitched a ride on George Clinton's mothership.

Mixed in, though, are enough squeaky clean ditties to suggest fiddling from label reps who heard the first draft freakouts and demanded easier hits like "Love in High Places" and "Nobody But You." The latter, a middling stab at pop ubiquity, drops

the album's IQ a few points. A guest turn from John Legend shouldn't be surprising, considering that by the time it rolls around, we've been prepared for some whiplash.

— RANDALL ROBERTS

**Smokey Robinson**  
"Smokey & Friends"  
Verve  
★★½

Gather your hits and divvy them up among your pals: It's a go-to move for musicians of a certain age, including Tony Bennett and Lionel Richie, who scored a No. 1 album in 2012 with "Tuskegee."

So it was only a matter of time until Smokey Robinson got into the act. But if the duets record is beginning to feel like a legacy-burnishing obligation, Robinson, 74, side-steps that vibe on "Smokey & Friends," a would-be museum piece with some real air in it. That's partly because Robinson still sounds like a singer on active duty.

He harmonizes beautifully with Mary J. Blige on "Being With You" and floats so effortlessly through "Quiet Storm" that John Legend comes off like an overachiever. Yet "Smokey & Friends" works too because Robinson appears to have given his guests carte blanche, gamely accompanying Elton John as the latter growls through "The Tracks of My Tears" and ad libbing over James Taylor's country-funk groove in "Ain't That Peculiar."

— MIRAEEL WOOD

Albums are rated on a scale of four stars (excellent), three stars (good), two stars (fair) and one star (poor).