

ARTS & BOOKS

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KIM MCKOY Los Angeles Times

"NATURE has always been something that gets me creative," says New Zealand-born Kimbra. She surrendered to that in L.A., which helped to foster her new album.

REFLECTIONS

With 'The Golden Echo,' Kimbra invites listeners to pause and think

By MIKAEL WOOD >>> On Feb. 10, 2013, Kimbra walked onto the Staples Center stage and accepted a Grammy Award from Prince, who added his own seal of approval before reading the Recording Academy's pick for record of the year.

"Oh, I love this song," he said of "Somebody That I Used to Know," the quirky pop hit by Gotye that featured Kimbra's vocals and topped the Billboard Hot 100, eventually selling 7.7 million copies and racking up more than half a billion plays on YouTube.

Such a public endorsement by a music legend is the kind of moment a young artist might regard as a pivot point, an episode that set a course for triumphs to come. But a different day looms larger in Kimbra's memory: the next one.

That's when the New Zealand native moved into a rented Silver Lake property she'd discovered on Craigslist — a small farm, in her description, complete with sheep, a rooster and an outdoor stove set atop a tree stump.

"It was this strange little oasis," she said recently. "Nature has always been [See **Kimbra**, E9]"



POP MUSIC



KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times

KIMBRA'S just-released "The Golden Echo" shot into the top 20 on the iTunes album chart. She is performing every Sunday night in September at the Bootleg HiFi.

Making a 'sonic experience'

something that gets me creative, and finally I felt centered again. That changed everything."

Eighteen months later, the fruit of that creativity is revealed on Kimbra's impressive new album, "The Golden Echo." Released Tuesday by Warner Bros. Records, it's a boldly inventive pop experiment that moves from lush disco to sweaty R&B to crunching hard rock with the idiosyncratic logic of someone working in a makeshift home studio. Yet songs like "Carolina" and "'90s Music" face outward too, their bright melodies as irresistible as their textures are beguiling.

"Kimbra is thick with thought, and that can sometimes challenge the ear," said Van Dyke Parks, the veteran producer and arranger who devised the darting string parts in "As You Are." "But she does whatever she can to bring some confection to it. She always makes it tasty."

Born Kimbra Johnson, the 24-year-old grew up playing music in Hamilton, New Zealand, where the window in her childhood bedroom, she recalled wistfully, looked out over a river. In 2008 she moved to Melbourne after signing a management deal and began work on what would become her debut album, "Vows."

Full of sweetly off-kilter tunes reminiscent of the Canadian singer-songwriter Feist, the record sold well in Australia upon its release there in 2011. But to capitalize on the growing success of Gotye's "Somebody That I Used to Know" — a duet facilitated by the singers' shared producer, François Tétaz — Warner Bros. brought Kimbra to L.A. and teamed her with proven hit makers like Greg Kurstin and Mike Elizondo to record a handful of new tracks for the album's U.S. edition.

"That sounds like a very clinical process," the singer said at a café not far from her current home in Echo Park. (Having decided she was ready for an indoor kitchen, she left the sheep farm this summer.) "But it wasn't a thing of 'Let's add a few American pop songs.' If anything, what I added was slightly more left of center."

Still, Kimbra spent 2012 touring like an aspiring pop star, at one point playing eight shows over four days at that year's South by Southwest music festival; she also performed with Gotye on "Saturday Night Live," recorded a song for Tim Burton's movie "Frankenweenie" and collaborated with DJ A-Trak and Mark Foster (of the band Foster the People) as part of a Converse promotion. By the time of the Grammys last year, she was ready for a bit of the solitude that a Craigslist post appeared to promise.

"I'd go outside in the morning



PHIL WALTER/Getty Images

ON HOME TURF, Kimbra performs at the Vodafone New Zealand Music Awards in November 2012 in Auckland.

and cook eggs that I'd get from the coop," she remembered. "Then I'd eat my breakfast with the animals, looking out over Los Angeles."

The solace-in-nature thing can sometimes seem like a put-on, but for Kimbra it feels genuine. In our conversation at the coffee shop she was perfectly friendly yet spoke hurriedly, as though anxious to get through a series of talking points. But she seemed to relax later during a walk through Elysian Park, even as our path led us to scurry up

a steep dirt hill.

"I'm from New Zealand," she said. "This is no big deal."

As inspiring as the farm was, Kimbra knew she needed additional tools to complete "The Golden Echo," which she wanted to sound "weightier" than "Vows" — like a "sonic experience," she said, in which scrappy, low-fi sounds would blend with slicker, more high-fi elements. So she took up with the producer Rich Costey, who installed her at his well-



ALLEN J. SCHABEN/Los Angeles Times

GOTYE and Kimbra backstage at the Grammys in 2013 with their trophies for the song "Somebody That I Used to Know."

'Everything on this record was a product of looseness. Nothing was precious.'

— RICH COSTEY,
co-producer of Kimbra's "The Golden Echo"

stocked L.A. studio; there they brought in players including Parks, the soul-jazz bassist Stephen Bruner (better known as Thundercat) and John "J.R." Robinson, a drummer celebrated for his work with Michael Jackson.

"Everything on this record was a product of looseness," Costey said. "Nothing was precious." The producer recalled opening computer files for some songs and discovering that Kimbra had already recorded upward of 250 separate parts. His job, he said, was to "consolidate" the singer's vision without sacrificing the spirit of adventure that defined her early demos.

Lenny Waronker, an A&R executive at Warner Bros. who helped oversee the record's progress, said Kimbra and Costey met that goal.

"We never knew what we were going to get from her," Waronker said. "The only thing predictable about Kimbra is her unpredictability."

And yet the release of "The Golden Echo," which quickly broke into the top 20 on the iTunes album chart, has put Kimbra into a familiar pattern of interviews and photo shoots and concert tours like the one she's scheduled to launch in October. (Before she leaves town she'll perform every Sunday night

in September at the Bootleg HiFi near MacArthur Park.)

Considering all that's on the horizon, Kimbra said she's better prepared this time for the wearying experience of promoting a record in "an age of high stimulus and short attention." While living at the farm she began practicing meditation, she said, "trying to breathe and not get caught up in the need to just fulfill my yearning and move on."

"We live surrounded by projections of the self," she continued, and if that's true for normal people obsessed with tailoring their social-media identities, it's even truer for an artist whose "whole life is about output," as she put it.

Yet the title of "The Golden Echo," drawn from the name of a flower linked to the Greek myth of Narcissus, advises listeners to slow down and engage more deeply with the music, like Narcissus gazing at his own image reflected in a pool of water.

"That's a skill we're losing a bit," said Kimbra, whose gorgeously detailed album rewards such close attention.

"What if this record helps somebody do it?"

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