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Monday, October 29, 2001

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ARTIST INFO

[Bilal](#)

1st Born Second, Bilal

(Interscope)

Head Of The Class

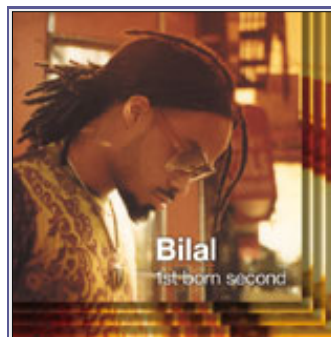
By Lynne d Johnson

The 22-year-old Bilal (Beloved, Intelligent, Lustful, and Livin' It) will likely be compared to his Philly neo-soul contemporaries — King Britt, the Roots, Jill Scott and Musiq Soulchild. Moreover, his lustful, falsetto-drenched croon will be likened to that of D'Angelo, Maxwell, even Prince. Granted, Bilal is a member of the Soulquarians collective (also featuring Common, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, Erykah Badu, Mos Def, Q-Tip and D'Angelo), but there are moments on his debut album, *1st Born Second*, that are totally unclassifiable. Perhaps the secret's in his schooling: a former gospel and jazz singer, Bilal was classically trained at New York's Mannes Conservatory of Music, where he learned to sing in seven (!) languages.

Bilal can sing in seven languages, and vocalize like nobody's business.

Still, he's proven he can hold his own amongst the hip-hop set. Bilal has appeared on recordings by Common and Guru, and the hip-hop collaborations continue on *1st Born*, with guest appearances by Mos Def and

Common (on the Pete Rock & C.L. Smooth-inspired "Reminisce") and production by Dr. Dre (on the funk

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in-your-trunk "Fast Lane" ([RealAudio excerpt](#)). Other radio-friendly tracks include "Love It," an electrifying ode to relationships written and produced by Mike City (Sunshine Anderson, Carl Thomas), and "Soul Sista," a sexually charged love anthem produced by Raphael Saadiq (Tony! Toni! Toné!, Lucy Pearl). Over Questlove's reverberating drum rolls on "Sometimes" ([RealAudio excerpt](#)), Bilal confronts his fears, singing, "Sometimes/ I wish I wasn't me/ Sometimes/ I wish I was drug-free/ Sometimes."

While Bilal's vocal gymnastics — high-arching notes, off-rhythm choruses and complex harmonies — add texture to these songs, many of them sound too musically similar to everything else in the neo-soul movement. He's at his best on the tracks that he or his partner, Dahoud Darien, have produced themselves. On "All That I Am (Somethin for the People)" ([RealAudio excerpt](#)), over an uptempo, Tribe Called Quest-style beat, Bilal speed-sings, punching out his lyrics with articulated phrasings. And on the reggae-flavored "Home," he comes across like a Baptist preacher, wailing and moaning with a free-flowing cadence. Call Bilal a neo-soulster if you will, but the cat can vocalize, harmonize and dramatize like nobody's business, which gives him an extra edge over the competition.

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