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New CDs: Kenny Chesney, Nikka Costa and Lucinda Williams

She's comfortable with vintage soul

Nikka Costa "Pebble to a Pearl" (Go Funk Yourself/Stax)

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"If you're a tree I'll be the roots," Nikka Costa tells a lover on "Pebble to a Pearl," her first effort since departing the major-label system that never quite managed to make her a star. (If Costa's name rings a bell, it's most likely because you remember the Tommy Hilfiger spot that featured her song "Like a Feather.")

Roots are important to Costa, whose late father, Don, was a string arranger known for his work with Frank Sinatra: Where her previous two albums put a high-tech spin on old-school soul music, "Pebble," which she co-produced with her husband, Justin Stanley, reaches for a meticulous vintage-vinyl vibe clearly modeled on early-'70s records by [Stevie Wonder](#) and Curtis Mayfield.

The result is Costa's most natural-sounding record by a mile; compared to the jittery electro-funk of 2001's "Everybody Got Their Something" (helmed in part by Mark Ronson, who went on to great success with Amy Winehouse), new songs such as "Cry Baby" and "Loving You" exude the relaxed air of someone working in her comfort zone. Yet as any Winehouse fan knows, soul music needs a little unease to transcend baby-making utility, and with none of that here, Costa's creation occasionally comes off like a well-appointed museum piece.

"You can't please everybody no matter how hard you try," she sings at one point, as if anticipating the inevitable Winehouse comparisons. True -- but at least Costa seems satisfied pleasing herself.

--Mikael Wood