

## REVIEWS

## SARA EVANS

**Stronger**

[Sony Nashville]

On her first album in five years, Sara Evans courts country radio with a firm determination. A slick package of twang pop, *Stronger* begins with more Hallmark schmaltz than Tennessee waltz: her remake of Rod Stewart's late '80s hit "My Heart Can't Tell You No" marks the nadir of a middling first half. The second half is where you'll find the winners: Songs like "Alone" and "Ticket to Ride" (not the Beatles number) have an intelligence and depth worthy of Evans' talent. When she's singing about heartache and misery, the results are magic. On "What That Drink Cost Me," a nuanced account of substance abuse, she plays to the strengths of her plaintive alto. As a fitting finale, Evans essays a bluegrass version of "Born to Fly," offering a hint of how her music might blossom if she were to strip away the sonic trappings and take a more organic approach. —Blake Boldt

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