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Danielle French – Dark Love Songs

Danielle French Presents Miss Scarlet and the Madmen in Dark Love Songs is, undoubtedly, one of the longest album titles this reviewer has encountered in a while. The nine songs on this release, however, are models of the form in terms of conciseness and length. French wastes little time, as a composer, belaboring with extended melodic treatments and every musical move serves some larger compositional purpose. She never overindulges with song length and the running order of tracks clearly illustrates a higher purpose to her sequencing. French's youth shouldn't fool anyone. Despite the album's collaborative nature and birth, French is a singular talent working well beyond her years. The vocals on this album will impress even the most jaded of music fans.

The endlessly creative musical sets she finds for this material will likewise impress. "Last Goodbye" waltzes mysteriously past the listener, but French's vocal and the solid lyrical content nail the song down. Her vocal serves as the central force keeping the song's focus clear, but the complimentary nature of the surrounding music shouldn't be underestimated. The mix sets the stage for what is to come later. "Take Me Away" has its own exotic flavor and there's a thrill listening to a songwriter completely unafraid to twist conventions. This is a stylistic cross between slow burn R&B and straight blues with its stinging guitar fills and pinpoint guitar work. Dark Love Songs will surprise many with the strutting rock driving the song "Did I Want You?", but it fits the lyrical content well and French gives quite an enthusiastic performance. The album reverts to softer strains on the next track, "It Must Be Roses", but never loses any of its momentum. The languid tempos and downcast mood never means that French is shut out from bringing a much different sort of energy to these proceedings. She inhabits these sort of songs like a persistent specter and her emotive power alone is enough to transcend any latent tendencies these songs might have towards cliché thanks to their common themes. French is unquestionably skilled at making the old new again for a different generation.

"Black Sunday" is clearly written and recorded as one of the album's centerpieces. If this theory is true, French succeeds spectacularly well thanks, in no small part, to the introduction of alternate instruments. Instead of keyboards or guitars, violin is placed in perfect counterpoint to French's vocal melody and the juxtaposition has magnificent results. "My Shadow and Me" has a much artier edge than even some of the earlier numbers and a jarring tempo that never quite settles into an expected groove. It isn't discordant, however, and matches the song's subject matter. There's an unexpected playful edge to the lyrical material, but make no mistake – the song's theme never lightens much. Songs like this and other help the album's second half stand out even stronger than the first but, in the end, this is an amazingly coherent effort for such a potentially combustible mix of material.

8 out of 10 stars.

Joshua Stryde

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