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Danielle French – Dark Love Songs

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URL: <http://www.daniellefrench.com/>

The career of Canadian born singer/songwriter Danielle French has been marked since its beginning by its restless, antsy creative spirit. Her name has graced the cover of five releases since her 1995 start and the latest, *Dark Love Songs*, ranks as her most daring and fully realized yet. The nine song collection is the product of songwriting clinics sponsored by Pat MacDonald, former singer of the 1980's art-pop duo Timbuk3. The latest release, unsurprisingly, sports an eclectic range and never stays pinned down for long. French has a fondness for exploring recognizable genres in distinctive ways, always filtered through the transformative vehicle of her own personality, and *Dark Love Songs* is no different. It has a remarkably retro air while sounding completely modern – the musical theater trappings of the songs are brilliantly captured while the array of more modern musical influence seamlessly weaves its way through each of the tracks.

"Last Goodbye" is an ideal example of this. There are distinctly supernatural qualities to the musical treatment on this song, as if the blurry instrumentation and dreamy movement seemed to emerge from somewhere out of time, but the song isn't merely some meandering soundscape barely tethered to form by French's vocals and lyrics. The arrangement carries its own way and never sounds arbitrary. The album's second song "Take My Love" sounds inviting, but French hits listeners with a slowly seething and rueful reflection on misdirected love and passion gone awry. For any of us to be sitting here and listening to French tackle this time-tested theme and not stumble may seem, to some, like an insignificant feat. Her vocals and lyrical musings state themselves, however, in a direct and often eloquent fashion that gives each of these familiar variations on a theme a spin all their own. Her ability to reclaim the old for her own purposes finds more ideal expression in the third track, "Did You Want Me?" This is an outright foray into rock, albeit retro minded with its steady handed invocation of rock poses from decades gone by.

"It Must Be Roses" moves with enchanting melancholy that French's vocal capitalizes on. She is in supreme storytelling mode here and confidently guides the listener through some of her finest work yet concerning the vagaries of love. Some might think that her treatment wears on the listener's attention after a while, but these are potential listeners who fail to properly value thematic consistency. *Dark Love Songs* hangs together quite well, each of its nine songs pieces of an interlocking conceptual puzzle, but the individual tracks are also equally capable of standing alone as fully realized musical works. The album's final two songs are a surprising contrast that reinforces the aforementioned point. "This is Why We Drink" is perhaps the album's most convincing take yet on the theme of wrecked lives with a wildly inventive French vocal leading the way followed by an instrumental recapitulation of the album's opening song. It's a neat bit of symmetry to close things with and reveals her solid songwriting judgment in full.

8 out of 10 stars.

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Bradley Johnson

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