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ALBUM REVIEW

Danielle French - Dark Love Songs

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Great things often spring from inauspicious beginnings. The nine song release from Danielle French entitled *Dark Love Songs* might not seem, after first listen, that it emerged from an essentially egalitarian songwriting clinic in northern Wisconsin. Over the course of four years, the experienced singer/songwriting French attended intensive songwriting clinics in the town of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin convened by Timbuk3 songwriter Pat MacDonald and worked with a variety of musicians to help shape and, ultimately, record the songs on this album. The unusual methods through which they arrived at these collaborations, by random lottery, might suggest to some that the release lacks cohesion or a sense of songwriting unity. It is clear, however, that French and her cohorts were never working at cross purposes and, instead, quickly arrived at a mutually shared vision for how each song should turn out.

The clarity is apparent in even unlikely places. The first song “Last Goodbye” is a very deliberate effort, but it likewise has the same spontaneity one might expect in a final goodbye when words come slowly and emotion leaks, rather than pours, out of your heart. The keyboard textures add much to the song without ever taking it into unwanted melodrama. The second song “Take My Love” is a gravel hard blues with an artsy side. It hints at some south of the border nuance thanks to its reverb spiked guitar and groove-oriented movement. French responds to the gritty backing with a slightly surly performance of her own, but her range of emotion is much wider and invokes a variety of moods throughout the song’s duration. “Did You Want Me?” has a steady rock pulse quite uncommon on the album, but the backing musicians and French handle it with equal skill. It never pushes too hard so that it sounds completely different

from the surrounding songs, but there's a bite here that even the preceding number lacks. "It Must Be Roses" has a gentle musicality glossing over its resolute grief and strength in the face of adversity. Much of that resolute grief and strength alike comes from French's vocal alone and it plays well against a musical backdrop not dissimilar to that used on the opening track.

Dark Love Songs hits a high note with "Black Sunday", a violin led melodic masterpiece in miniature with a slow, unwinding pace. French gives it a dramatic reading every bit the equal of the music and the blending of the two has remarkable sophistication in such a deceptively simple framework. "My Shadow and Me" is perhaps one of the album's more remarkable moments with how French brings together a variety of elements, pop, folk, blues, and throws them into a wonderfully disjointed tempo perfectly embodying the song's lyrical theme. It sets the stage for the album's greatest moment, "This is Why We Drink", a blackly humorous lament that stomps, staggers, and pushes its way towards a final climax. The use of sound effects is particularly effective here for helping invoke atmosphere. It concludes Dark Love Songs in the finest of ways.

9 out of 10 stars.

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

iTUNES: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/miss-scarlett-madmen-dark/id1119843019> (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/miss-scarlett-madmen-dark/id1119843019>)

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