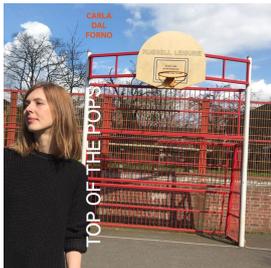


Brainwashed - Carla dal Forno, "Top of the Pops"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Originally only available on cassette during dal Forno's summer tour, this EP of six eclectic covers is now available digitally. As anyone who has heard her occasional NTS Radio DJ appearances can attest, dal Forno has delightfully wide-ranging taste and definitely appreciates a great hook when she hears it, so it is not at all surprising that there are some extremely deep cuts here (The Kiwi Animal) mingled with a few names that actually *have* spent time at the top of the pop charts (Lana del Ray and The B-52s). While the latter's early "Give Me Back My Man" undergoes quite an impressive transformation, Carla is generally quite reverent with her source material, taking a handful of great songs and simply paring them down to their stark and intimate essence.

Self-Released

I generally shy away from tour-only releases these days, as I eventually realized (much later than I should have) that they are almost never very good and are mostly just noteworthy for their scarcity. Consequently, I did not start salivating over *Top of the Pops* when "Summertime Sadness" surfaced as a teaser, though it is certainly a likably ghostly and skeletal channeling of Lana del Ray. An all-covers EP just seemed like kind of a fun, throw-away release strictly for superfans, which is rarely a category I find myself in. However, I probably should have learned something from Marisa Nadler's cover albums, which sneakily include some of her finest work, as similar feat occurs with

Pops

. Obviously, Nadler and dal Forno are quite different artists, but they share one extremely significant trait: both have a very distinctive and instantly recognizable style. As such, any cover song that passes through that transformative filter stops feeling like a cover and feels very much like something new. In dal Forno's case, that signature style is a half-sultry/half-spectral minimalism built from just her voice, a simple bass line, and a scratchy, ramshackle drum machine beat. Occasionally, she will also throw in some wobbly, understated synthesizer, but it is generally a deceptively simple and incredibly effective aesthetic. The music is just substantial enough to provide a sense of momentum, but nothing is forceful or busy enough to ever steal the focus from the vocals.

Top of the Pops

feels a lot like finding a worn and forgotten mixtape and happily discovering that all the parts that truly matter still manage to break through the hiss and flutter.

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Much like *The Garden*, *Top of the Pops* is an EP where every single song feels like a strong single. I suppose that makes some sense for an all-cover release, but neither Lilliput nor Una Baine's solo project The Fates are best remembered for their chart dominance. Also, my attempt to hear the original version of The Kiwi Animal's "Blue Morning" was entirely fruitless (though my search did yield roughly a million videos of adorable birds). I was also completely unfamiliar with '80s Dutch pop band Renée, whose opening "Lay Me Down" is one of

Pops' strongest songs. The original is a fairly slick bit of sultry New Wave-y pop and dal Forno sticks quite close to the original structure and melody. However, she ingeniously replaces the muted guitars and jazzy synths with a delightfully lurching and clapping groove that is even more fun than the original. The plinking and bouncy "Blue Morning" is similarly excellent, recounting heartache in unexpectedly poetic and poignant fashion. Still more impressive are the feats of alchemy that Carla pulls off with The Fates' "No Romance" and The B-52s "Give Me Back My Man." To my ears, neither of the original pieces quite worked, but it turns out that they both just needed a bit of restructuring. In the case of "No Romance," it was a great song that was just too anemic-sounding and too sing-song, so dal Forno made the vocal melody a bit more sensuous and fluid and carved away almost everything except for a muscular and insistently thumping beat. "Give Me Back My Man," on the other hand, was a driving rocker with a cool riff that was just a bit too weird and lacking in a strong verse melody to quite stand with band's best work. In this case, Carla opted to completely rebuild the song from the ground up, leaving only the lyrics and a ghost of the melody. That perverse strategy worked brilliantly, as the piece is reborn as haunting and seductive new piece with slow, sexy groove.

With "Give Me Back My Man," dal Forno transcends her source material so thoroughly that it is more like a great new original song than a mere cover. In fact, it is probably one of my favorite songs that she has recorded to date, so it was definitely a wise decision to give this EP a more widespread reach. One fresh classic would have been enough to make me delighted about this modest release, but there is not a single weak or even middling song to be found. While the song choices are all unwaveringly cool and the arrangements are frequently inspired, *Top of the Pops*

succeeds on a deeper level as well, as dal Forno manages to playfully indulge her more fun and hook-loving side without sacrificing much of her intensity or depth. While some of the lyrics are admittedly more flirty, breezy, and sexy than usual, the right singer can bring new and previously hidden shades of meaning and soul to just about anything and dal Forno has found a way to make even The B-52s seem enigmatic and introspective with this release.

Samples:

- [Lay Me Down](#)
- [Blue Morning](#)
- [Give Me Back My Man](#)