

Brainwashed - Maria Somerville, "All My People"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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MARIA SOMERVILLE
ALL MY PEOPLE

It is quite a rare and improbable event for a self-released debut to amass so much buzz and acclaim upon its release, but *All My People* is quite a deserving recipient for such good fortune. For better or worse, Somerville's work is likely to draw superficial comparisons to Carla dal Forno or Liz Harris, as she is quite fond of simple drum machine patterns, reverb-swathed vocals, and minimal musical accompaniment. At its heart, however, Somerville's vision is a fresh and unique one, as that stark template is an unlikely framework for a delightfully eclectic and unabashedly pop-minded suite of songs (albeit pop in the classic sense, a la *Pet Sounds*

). In that regard, the achingly gorgeous centerpiece "Dreaming" is the album's biggest draw, but Somerville is just as adept at the production side of the equation, taking these seven pieces in some delightfully inventive and unusual directions.

[Self-Released](#)

The opening "Eyes Don't Say It" is initially a deceptively subdued and hazy introduction, as a bittersweet ascending melody slowly creeps into a landscape of buried, heartbeat-like kick drum and blurrily impressionistic dreampop guitars. That languorous, navel-gazing lead-in proves to be kind of an ingenious bit of songcraft magic though, as the song blossoms into swooningly romantic and vivid color when the first chorus arrives and essentially remains there for the rest of its duration, steadily amassing more warmth and deeper harmonies as layers of breathy vocals pile up. It is quite a beautiful song and it would be a strong template for the rest of the album to follow. To Somerville's credit, however, she never goes back to the same well twice, gamely imbuing each of these seven songs with their own quirks and character. For example, the following "All I Ever Wanted" is a bit of suave and sensuous art-pop in the vein of Stereolab, but stripped down to little more than a breezily shuffling groove. It is quite a likable song in general, but the touches in the periphery are a masterpiece of sexy, subtle psychedelia, as bleary Theremin-like melodies, woozy washes of guitar, and a wandering, chorus-heavy bass line gradually build up to a hallucinatory crescendo of distant voices. The title piece pulls off a similarly delicious feat of psych-pop transformation, opening with a cavernous house thump and a ghostly haze of uneasy drones before being unexpectedly joined by a pretty, floating vocal melody that sounds like an a capella rendition of a traditional Irish folk song. It is a truly bizarre convergence of threads, as it feels like two radically different pieces of music mashed together, albeit in a pleasing (if disorienting) way. Gradually, however, a host of buzzing drones and

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other subtly lysergic elements fade in until the song fully takes shape as a coherent whole.

On the more unrepentantly hook-heavy side, the aforementioned "Dreaming" is the album's unquestionable zenith, calling to mind a hypnagogic reincarnation of classic Patsy Cline (or at least an especially great song by underappreciated 4AD alums Tarnation). In lesser hands, such a piece would be dragged down by melancholy, but Somerville sounds like a wide-eyed ingenue sensuously crooning her favorite love song at a karaoke bar in a David Lynch film: surreal textures gnaw at the edges and the song occasionally threatens to dissolve into the ether, yet it never stops being an innocently warm, sincere, and absolutely lovely piece at its core. The closing "Brighter Days" is yet another dose of pure pop bliss, but it is a bit more straightforward, as a trebly, ramshackle drum machine beat cheerily lurches forward through murky major chords and dreamy vocal melodies. Much like "Dreaming," it feels like the pop of a simpler time when almost every song was about love and a great hook was everything. To an uncanny degree, Somerville is singularly skilled at channeling classic country or '60s girl group songcraft without a hint of irony or heavy-handed pastiche, coming across as heartfelt and reverent while still managing to make these recordings sound like they were dubbed over a badly worn Enya tape found in your childhood bedroom.

While "Dreaming" is already a lock for one of my favorite songs of the year, one immortal song does not necessarily make for a great album (it just makes for a great single). *All My People* comes very close to being a great album though, as the only real caveat is that its impressive cavalcade of sublime and ghostly pop gems is a bit too brief to amount to a completely satisfying whole. That said, I genuinely appreciate the perfect, uncluttered brevity of Somerville's catchiest songs: she can pack a lot of beauty, inspiration, and depth into a mere three minutes and wisely never sticks around longer unless she has a cool idea for an outro. On a deeper level, however, much of her brilliance is of the intuitive and intangible variety. Obviously, lo-fi bedroom recordings have been an indie pop trope for years, yet Somerville has that magic touch that transforms "hiss-soaked and sketchlike" into "intimate and undiluted." She also has a knack for making prettiness feel pregnant with hidden depth rather than lightweight, as well as a real genius for making her more experimental flourishes feel like natural, organic elements that were gently coaxed out of their hook-filled hiding spots. Everything is done with an unerring lightness of touch and an endearing fluidity. Artists like Somerville are a true rarity: a gifted and soulful songwriter who is also effortlessly idiosyncratic enough to appeal to someone as cranky and jaded as me.

All My People

is a legitimately remarkable debut.

Samples can be found [here](#).