

Rolling Stone

April 22, 2014

REVIEWS



Damon Albarn

Everyday Robots
Warner Bros.

Rolling Stone: ★★★★★

Community: ★★★★★

[f Like](#) 0 [t Tweet](#) 24 [g+1](#) 2 [Pin it](#) 3 [Submit](#) [Comment](#) 0 [✉](#) [🖨](#)

By **JON DOLAN**

APRIL 22, 2014

Damon Albarn has always seemed most comfortable with some distance between himself and his music. As **Blur**'s frontman, he played the tart-tongued wit, satirizing modern Britain from behind a wall of cheeky irony. With Gorillaz, he created the biggest virtual band since **Kiss**. Even his forays into global music – jamming with Malian guitar greats, traveling to China to write an opera – place him in the well-worn role of a worldly seeker losing himself in the exotic. In 2012, he made a record about the life of 16th-century English mystic John Dee. But he's never really made a record about the life of 21st-century English mystic Damon Albarn.

Until now. All of Albarn's musical obsessions are present on his revealing solo debut: dubby textures à la Gorillaz, Caribbean and African notes, looming classical instrumentation and church choruses that evoke England's past – all wrapped around a singing voice that's become deep and searching where it was once sharp and snarky. The past two Gorillaz albums, *Plastic Beach* and *The Fall*, both from 2010, often had a forlorn sense of spliffed-out drift. The mood on *Everyday Robots* is even more sparsely intimate, and often quite downbeat.

Albarn is an avid collaborator who has worked with greats like Bobby Womack and **Lou Reed**. But his pals stay low-key here. Producer Richard Russell sculpts alluring atmospheric beats; Bat for Lashes singer Natasha Khan lends a faint harmony to the fragile relationship autopsy "The Selfish Giant"; **Brian Eno** adds synths to "You & Me" and vocals to the woozy chantey "Heavy Seas of Love." The results can often recall Seventies Eno at his most meditative and Village Green-era Ray Davies at his most world-sick more than Gorillaz's bounce or Blur's guitar buzz.

The opening title track sets the softly alienated tone. Albarn floats amid a sea of commuters staring at their phones – "Looking like standing stones/Out there on our own." The track mixes Eastern and Western strings, somber piano and a hobbled, percussive groove that's evocatively primitive but utterly modern. Other songs work similar musical balances while mapping out Albarn's personal history. "You & Me" takes place during a Trinidadian carnival near his West London home, with steel drums playing against an unsure digital skitter. On the album's brightest tune, "Mr. Tembo," based on a trip he took to a Tanzanian nature preserve, Albarn strums a happy ukulele and serenades a baby elephant.

The album's most revealing track is "Hollow Ponds," which moves like a sad processional and reflects on scenes from throughout Albarn's life: a childhood vacation to the Black Sea; the day when he noticed the London graffiti that inspired the title of Blur's first great album, 1993's *Modern Life Is Rubbish*. The reel of images seems to compete, or merge with, "the dreams we share on LCDs." As the song ends, we hear the sampled sound of a rumbling subway train. With a restless innovator like Albarn, where you're going always matters more than where you've been.