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Damon Albarn bares his soul on his first solo album

'Everyday Robots' is a powerfully human turn



Though rarely recognized as such in the U.S., Damon Albarn was one of the most ambitious and distinctive artists to emerge in the '90s, leaving a lasting and valuable legacy with Blur's collected output. He's also been one of the alternative era's most ambitious and consistently rewarding survivors, with projects as rich and diverse as Gorillaz, the Good, the Bad & the Queen, and *Mali Music*, and only the occasional misstep (see [the 2012 opera Dr. Dee](#)). Amid all this activity, it's been easy to overlook the fact that he's never given us a proper solo album—until now.

Clearly, Albarn thrives on collaboration, but it's also possible that he's been afraid to stand naked and alone, having adorned so much of his work with the arch ironic detachment of the sociological observer. (He absolutely is his/my generation's Ray Davies.) The 46-year-old singer and songwriter largely drops that shield on *Everyday Robots*, even as he recruits a shorter but still impressive roster of playmates, including Brian Eno, Bats for Lashes, and producer Richard Russell, with whom he crafted 2012's *The Bravest Man in the Universe* for Bobby Womack..

Musically, Albarn largely revels in subtle piano, plucked acoustic guitars, quiet drones, and heartbeat percussion—he calls this late-night ambience “empty club music”—while lyrically he waxes much more personal and introspective, mulling over his childhood, adolescence, and rock-star 20s, as well as (gasp!) failed relationships. “Some days I look at the morning trying to work out how I got here/Cause the distance between us is the glamour's cost,” he sings in “You & Me,” and if we don't know whether he's addressing ex-paramour Justine Frischmann, ex-bandmate Graham Coxon, or some other lost love, the truth of that sentiment rings loud and clear. Ditto his touching admission of the role that music plays in his and our lives: “Accepting that you live with uncertainty/If you're lonely press play.” No irony there, and it pretty much says it all, doesn't it?

As at a [show premiering this material onstage during South by Southwest](#), the only misstep is a dreadful ukulele-powered track called “Mr. Tembo” about a baby elephant Albarn befriended in Tanzania. He may have been going for a “Yellow Submarine”/“Octopus's Garden”-style detour, but he barely achieves a bad PBS children's ditty, while briefly shattering an otherwise brilliant musical reverie.

Damon Albarn, *Everyday Robots* (Parlophone)

Rating on the 4-star scale: 3.5 stars