

Just Love Me When I Sing: Janet Cull's "Real Tough Love"
By Brad Pretty
The Overcast

Underneath Janet Cull's "Real Tough Love" lies a coal engine powering a locomotive filled with local splendor. It's deep, it's dark. It flares up and pushes forward. It smokes its way to the next stop, each its own sordid haunt, each with its own soul, its own cry or lament.

The only real consistency is the thick cloud her voice is wrapped in. It's confident, sultry, and downright huge, each inhale and exhale measured precisely with just the right dose of grace and power.

It's a ride that Janet shares with some fine company. On one side of the tracks are the musicians; some of the most renowned and celebrated this city has to offer. There's real talent and taste rounding every turn, likely unparalleled in any other local release this year.

On the other, often overlapping with the performers, are the songwriters. Cull shares only two co-writing credits on the album, and the remainder is made up of excerpts taken deep from the catalogues of a selection of St. John's songsmiths. But this is not due to a lack of craft; nor is it an afterthought. It's a deliberate decision that takes the album in various directions.

The Novaks' Mick Davis lends a trio of tunes, while Virginia Fudge steps it up to four. Within local confines, the songbook approach is a relatively novel concept; songwriters usually play their own songs, maybe stretching to incorporate the scattered standard. Here, Cull's decided to pay homage to good friends and good musicians.

And it works. Well, it mostly works. The album sounds grand, the playing is immaculate and her vocals are heavenly. When the album is on, it's on. But there's a lack of identity. Borrowing from such a wide swath of songwriters has spread it thin. Diversity in style should be praised, but the quality of songwriting contained on "Real Tough Love" is erratic. One song might bounce between 90's radio rock melancholia, while the next might be a clever little jingle.

There's dreamy blues bar numbers, and then there's new wave inspired pop. Between real showcases of creativity and catchiness lie a list of cliches. Prime example: two separate songs use a "Hold On" hook. With the combined pedigrees of everyone involved, there's just a lot of missed opportunities

Which is a shame, but that doesn't discount the great moments. The title track stands up as my favourite rocker of the bunch. Davis' "One Plus One" is an offbeat little sojourn. "You Boy Blue" is big and poppy in all the right ways. "Mommy's Boy" is a homemade gospel chorus that sends the album off into the clouds.

"Highway of Tears", though, is where the band sits best and sounds most comfortable. Its hazy jazz cadence is also a natural place for Janet's voice, which, by the way, is incredibly versatile. She never sounds out of place, hopping around to each genre poised to conquer it. The album is worth a spin solely based on her masterful presence.

There's a lot going on with Real Tough Love. Sonically, it's great. The production is clear and crisp, and the talent just seeps from it. There's many ears that it will find a home in and rightfully so. It's beautiful in bursts. It's rueful and real. But it's the adventurous type that just can't settle down.

REVIEW: Janet Cull - Real Tough Love
by Todd Shelter
Rock Island Magazine

If you have never heard of Janet Cull we'll have to assume you moved to Newfoundland and Labrador 7 minutes ago. She is everywhere. Does everything from musical theatre to soul to dinner theatre to gospel. And she is always performing. So, yeah, if you have never heard of her it's not her fault.

When the news came down from the top that I was to review the new Janet Cull album, Real Tough Love, my first question was "what kind of music is it going to be?". After spending the last few days listening to it over and over and over I can now answer that question.

It's all of them.

Real Tough Love varies from soul throwbacks to 80s pop-rock throwbacks and a bunch of other throwbacks. I could compile a list of artists riffed on here but they are loose references at best. So maybe the best description of it's style is to call it 'throwback'. There is a sense of familiarity with many of these songs. Not like you've heard them before. But you feel familiar with the vibe. Whatever style each tune is you could hear it sitting alongside hits from those styles original eras. That alone is quite a feat. Trying to balance on the thin line between kitschy and pretentious when referencing so much material that has come before has a ridiculously high improbability factor. Maybe it was the skillful shot calling by producer Kalem Mahoney. Maybe it was the deft engineering and mixing by Justin Merdsoy (additional engineering by Robert Kelly and Peter Green). Or the line up of some of NL's most sought after session musicians. But somehow Cull and her crew (known as Janet Cull's IN THE RED) managed to not only pull it off but make you have to work to find inconsistencies. It would be difficult to get this many musical egos in one room and get them to not try to outshine each other. I don't know what dark magic they used to let all that ego simmer but they ended up with an album that is devoid of ego. Do I sound impressed yet?

"But who are these writers?!?" you ask....Mick Davis, Virginia Fudge, Andrew LeDrew, Kalem Mahoney, Chris Kearsey, Steven Miller and Cull all contribute. Songs from such varied backgrounds played by a wrecking crew of local musical heavy hitters. Elliot Dicks, Craig Follett, Evan Smith, Mick Davis, Bradley Power, Paul Kinsman, Andrew LeDrew, Robert Kelly, Kalem Mahoney, Emily Dunsmore, Terry Campbell, Jack Miller and Justin Merdsoy lay a consistently rich soundscape.

Janet has a voice. It's kind of a known undebatable fact. Janet has a voice. But I think she actually has several. She can get down and growl or belt at the top of human hearing or whisper sweet nothings and lull you into her charms. But she does it all with extreme confidence in what she is doing. Nothing sounds hesitant at all. Everything has a purpose.

I started to write a few lines about every track but my review was getting hell's-a-long. There is just so much going on that you can't just talk about every single thing. It is the sort of album you can listen to for days in a row, like I have, and find new flourishes of ear candy that you never noticed were there before. Every song has dynamic range from kicking out the jams to sparse sweetness. It's rich. It's textured. It's complex. Like Janet and the posse of writers involved there are many levels to these songs. There are tunes here that start innocently enough. The kind you wouldn't mind meeting in the grocery store, but then you realize they aren't at all what you thought. Like I said....complex.

I contemplated picking out a favourite or two to point out. I couldn't. The songs work so well together that it is more like moments of the same story. You wouldn't describe a movie to a friend by picking out a favourite scene and attempting to represent the entire film by that one moment (or at least you shouldn't!). So I can't do that here. There are favourite moments, but there is a lot of them.

As this is my first review for Rock Island I haven't figured out a rating system yet. Do I go with stars? Thumbs? Thumbstars? I don't know. Whatever system it is it gets a bunch of 'em.

What can I say?...It's complex.

Janet Cull's IN THE RED will launch the album with a release party at Exile at Jag Hotel on Sunday, November 6th at 8pm.
The album is already available in stores and online.

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