

## Mp3 Mila Drumke Band - Radiate



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"Mila Drumke immediately tweaks the music gods imbedded deep in your marrow. Drumke is a little-known but incredibly talented artist whom half of you wants to tell the world about so she can immediately capture fame, fortune and fans, while the other half 10 MP3 Songs POP: Folk Pop, FOLK: Folk Pop Details: Review of Radiate by Hearsay magazine "Look how everything is changing, changing where you are," sings New York-based songwriter Mila Drumke on her ambitious, magnanimous and riveting fourth recording. We're five years on from her last release, 2000's Hip to Hip, a coolly-ahead-of-its-time reinvention of jazz standards and, yes, everything's different now. While all the traits which captivated Mila's admirers late in the last millennium are still in abundance the dynamic, supple compositions which nod to jazz and folk without really being either, the velveteen vocals, the oblique yet vivid lyrics no one could have anticipated an album quite so keenly felt, so moving and yet so scrupulously arranged and played as Radiate has turned out to be. How we live and how we die are not always so very different, and one of the great things about art is the way it allows us to resequence events, to return to happier times cut short, to let before and after coexist in order to understand both a little better. This is something Drumke does triumphantly in focusing Radiate almost exclusively on the last few months in the life of her ailing sister, and documenting the time the pair spent in San Francisco as her illness worsened and the inevitable slid into view. This is ambitious stuff for a whole album, with little precedent in the singer-songwriter world beyond such classic meditations on mortality as Kate Bush's The Red Shoes (Drumke has covered Bush before, to spectacular effect) and REM's Automatic for the People. Perhaps a closer kinship can be found between the pages of the personal memoir: Blake Morrison, Sue Miller and Isabel Allende, for example, would all recognise how Mila has re-tuned jangling nerves into eager, gorgeous melodies, how she has filled the hollows of loss with a cascading burst of

sound and sense. And while these ten songs inevitably have heartbreak at the core, they are buffeted by a natural kindness and grace which transcends specifics, letting Radiate bury itself in the hearts of anyone with an understanding of loss, no matter what the circumstances. This is an album full of memories; it's far more about endurance, of a kind, than it is about death. And it's particularly concerned with the potency of random recollections and juxtaposed timelines, which find their musical equivalent in the brilliant, high-contrast instrumentation. Toy piano, harmonium, and banjo flesh out Drumke's taut and always-reliable core band, but the eclecticism is never forced, and instead conjures a mood of the best of current auteur-songwriters like Sufjan Stevens and Laura Veirs. No one could have imagined that a banjo, for instance, could sound as moody and urgent as it does here on the spooky love song "Nothing's Gonna Bring the Sun Down." But if Drumke's songs are written and arranged by the head, they are sung straight from the heart in honeyed and enveloping tones which boast a warmth rarely found among art-rock or singer-songwriter types; a voice full of wisdom and power, with a timelessness one associates more with, say, kd lang, or even the classic interpretive singers. Much of Radiate is set in San Francisco, where sister Danielle lived and died, and perhaps it's just coincidence or something more mystical that there are hints of other Bay Area visionaries in here somewhere: the oblique psychology and painterly layering of Hannah Marcus (in her more dreamlike moments), for instance, or the midnight clarity of Alison Faith Levy. And the musical catholicism and lyrical full-heartedness of Mark Kozelek is close at hand, too: Drumke's songs "Days Go By" (with its carefully interlaced instrumentation in which Lyrus Hung's violin manages to sound crushed and consoling at the same time) and "California" chime with the finer moments of vintage Red House Painters. Further afield, the title track has enough snaking twists and sultry vocals to give Lizz Wright a run for her money, while "My Big Holiday," in which Mila puts Danielle's thoughts in song to recount a trip-of-a-lifetime to New Zealand, has the lovely light and shade of Sarah Harmer; the clinking toy piano picking out points of light on the ocean. All this scattershot namedropping only shows up the inadequacy of the references. For most of the time, Radiate doesn't really sound like anyone else. The arrangements throughout are fearsomely imaginative: just listen to how "Cliff House" counters the end-of-the-pier unease of its verses with a sunlit bridge section in which the instrumentation changes completely to become something anchored and hopeful. The sounds themselves carry the album's themes, detailing the contrasting emotions which jostle during any family crisis (the moodswings, the up-and-down-ness of it all, the understanding that even the very worst of

times contains good days and bad days). Lyrically, Radiate is always alert, always sensorially and temporally acute. In fact, it could hardly be more alive, full as it is of shafts of blue light, sounds from across the hall, fireworks in the sky, as Drumke channels the urgency felt by those up against time, the sense of a world that's too much with us, even while it continues to inspire. All five senses crackle in these places where "the houses in the hills light up like fireflies," and "even the vines reach out to touch your little face through the windows of your room." And Mila is particularly sharp on the way life goes crashingly on, because it must, in the face of dreadful news; how the world remains oblivious to microcosmic tragedies ("Michael's on a plane tonight running through all the things he wants to say to you/ Around him everyone is sleeping with their lights out and their seat belts on"). Of many outstanding tracks here, the most exquisite and overwhelming is the penultimate "Maybe Next Christmas," which reflects on the events from a snowbound New York. Its kaleidoscopic and circulatory structure is at least the match of Kate Bush (whom it vaguely resembles), but it's also graced with the starlit lyricism and lightness of touch of fellow Brooklynites Hem. The chalk-smudge guest vocals and countermelody provided by The Innocence Mission's Karen Peris also give a clue to its sound: otherworldly in spirit but anchored to an eternal, immediate present. Adam Ben-David's eloquent piano playing channels past and future, as the song itself does, tying everything together and underscoring the vividly bittersweet lyrics: "We could have children like they say we should/ Maybe next Christmas we'll feel like we could." What could have been a harrowing listen is instead bounteous and healing. To Drumke's credit, she never resorts to stock imagery of sterile hospitals and hand-wringing prognoses; by keeping the cold facts of illness offstage she makes something far richer and more complex, and yet more reassuringly universal. Who could not relate to the feelings driving the gorgeous, arcing "A Little Peace," for example, to its hope that "Maybe we'll get another week or a month, or even years of nights as clear as this," Radiate is not just an artistic triumph it's easily Mila Drumke's best work to date and one of the most impressive records of the year by anyone but a personal one, too. In taking unimaginable sadness and turning it into something both grounded and visionary, she has created a deeply humane song cycle; one which leaves us convinced that the most open hearts cannot be broken forever, that "the late day sunlight will win out again." Few albums say so much, so obliquely, so well, as Radiate. How important it is that it exists. by Neil Parkinson

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