

## Brainwashed - Barbara Morgenstern, "BM"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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The fifth solo album in Morgenstern's decade-long career marks a radical and somewhat bewildering departure from her previous releases. While her label claims she is "Berlin's queen of fragile and poetic electro-pop,"—and goes on to list a bunch of electronic acts she has done work with or for—nearly all electronics have been jettisoned from their central position and replaced with anachronistic piano-based rock.

### [Monika](#)

That is certainly an odd strategy, in light of the fact that her previous album (2006's *The Grass is Always Greener*

) was probably her most popular and beloved and even featured something of a minor hit in "The Operator." However, her new material shows newfound depth and her sound is uniquely hers, so it is unlikely that she has become mentally unmoored or is acting on a contrarian impulse to alienate her fanbase.

*BM* attempts to thread together a number of seemingly conflicting and disparate influences—purportedly Brecht and Weil, definitely '80s rock, accidentally Tori Amos (presumably), and possibly Gong—and the result is a mixture of surprising successes, unevenness, and occasional forgettability that sounds like it came from an indeterminate previous decade.

Morgenstern has chosen some strong complementary collaborators for this new direction. Most obviously, Robert Wyatt, who wrote a song for the album, "Camouflage," and joins Barbara on a duet. However, it is the lesser-known musicians that provide many of the subtle touches that prevent the album from falling prey to flatness and sameness. Sven Janetzko's guitar work provides some welcome adrenaline and propulsion to poppier moments like "Driving My Car," "Come to Berlin," and "Reich & Beruhmt," and his slide playing is invariably tasteful and well-placed. Julia Kent's cello work is also quite sympathetic and adds much color and depth to the sparse songs, especially when it is

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dissonant.

"Come to Berlin" is the album's single, which is appropriate, as it is much more muscular and immediate than anything else on the album. I am hesitant to say that it "rocks like a narcoleptic, Teutonic Pat Benatar," but that is exactly what it does and no other descriptive terms can really convey that very specific (and pleasing) characteristic.

"Meine Aufgabe" is also particularly striking (and probably my favorite track). It is built upon a charmingly lurching and simple organ pattern and is augmented by distant squealing and sliding strings. The chorus even (seamlessly) features a full choir. I would love to see her pursue this direction further. Despite its bold artistic departure, the bulk of the album feels very transitional: this is the only track that seems fully formed and unable to be improved upon. I am deeply curious to see where she goes from here.

My initial impression of the album was not entirely favorable, but subsequent listens have warmed me to it quite a bit. There is a lot to like—inspired and subtle touches loom in the background of nearly every song—however, I still find it to be frustratingly understated. It seems like she will have a hard time luring new listeners into her wintry, elegant world. But I suspect that she doesn't care.

samples:

- [Come to Berlin](#)
- [Meine Aufgabe](#)
- [Reich & Beruhmt](#)