

Carla Bruni review – first lady of jazz-pop delivers stylish Christmas sermon

By Ian Gittans

December 11, 2017

When Carla Bruni, the Italian-born, French-raised heiress and supermodel quit the catwalk to reinvent herself as a singer-songwriter 20 years ago, many thought it would be short-lived dilettantism. Yet Bruni surprised her detractors, showing herself to be a talented songwriter and a careful, nuanced singer whose jazzy chansons soon topped the French charts. She has continued to do so, even after the inevitable hiatus to her musical career caused by marrying Nicolas Sarkozy, and spending 2008-12 in the Élysée as France's first lady.

She has spoken of suffering from crippling stage fright, but this still-gamine figure, fronting a four-piece, light-jazz band, exudes preternatural poise. Bruni moves with beatific grace, recalling Karl Lagerfeld's praise of her as "this beautiful creature who can wear anything"; her husky whisper could be a parody of a breathy Gallic siren.

Her latest album is a set of cover versions sung in English, [French Touch](#), which is a decidedly mixed bag. It largely works because Bruni pours herself into the songs as if in thrall to them: her pitch-perfect, sparse croon through Depeche Mode's [Enjoy the Silence](#) identifies and amplifies the bleak yearning at the song's core.

The quirky arrangements can be eccentric. Bruni's cod-jazz take on Willie Nelson's [Crazy](#) veers near to lift muzak, while the jaunty noodling her band introduce to Lou Reed's Perfect Day sounds at odds with the song's dark soul. The Clash's Jimmy Jazz is transformed into a previously unknown genre that can only be described as ethereal boogie-woogie. Yet Bruni, all catwalk swagger and insouciant finger clicks, is a winning figure at the heart of these lateral interpretations. Her contralto on [Moon River](#), inspired by Audrey Hepburn's rendition in Breakfast at Tiffany's, is rich and intimate; a mid-set section of self-penned material, in French, confirms her music is no vanity project.

The highlight is a majestic, still reading of the glacial misery of Abba's [The Winner Takes It All](#); the chic devil's horns she flashes before trilling AC/DC's Highway to Hell are arguably less essential. Bruni ends the evening in the chapel's pulpit for a correctly understated velvet sigh through Hallelujah. It is beyond question the most stylish sermon London will hear this Christmas.

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