New on Pure Pop Radio 4.3.18: Secret Friend's The Divorce Album

By Alan Haber – Pure Pop Radio

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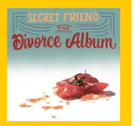
Secret Friend | *The Divorce Album* (2018)
This third Secret Friend album, whose vibe falls somewhere between 2013's Linus of Hollywood-produced *Time Machine* and 2015's sound expansive *Sleeper*, could well be the ultimate breakup record, but with a pop twist. In any case, it's terrific.



Which is to say that these songs cut right to the bone lyrically while also sounding happy and peppy and poppy. You might also say that there are two sides to Secret Friend pal Steven Fox's new songs. Indeed, there are two sides to them– each song (there are six in all) appears as both a Fox production and as produced by another artist painting with a differently colored brush.

With the two approaches, one labeled "Mine" and the other "Yours," you get different takes on the art of the breakup and snapshots of the forlorn from familiar pop voices who anchor Fox's latest creations. Welcome, then, the supporting talents of Rooney's Taylor Locke, Jellyfish's Roger Joseph Manning, Jr., Jimm McIver, Willie Wisely, Linus (of Hollywood) Dotson, Christian Nesmith, Wyatt Funderburk, Karla Kane, and a mysterious female vocalist mysteriously known as "K.O." Welcome, also, Rich Hinman, whose lyrical pedal steel playing elevates every song he plays on.

"Every songwriter has at least a few break-up songs tucked away," Fox writes in the accompanying digital booklet's introduction. Within *The Divorce Album* are just a few of them, including the opener, "Castaway," a bright burst of '80s pomp, happily sounding like a cross between early Wondermints and Haircut 100. Powered by Taylor Locke's spirited vocals and electric guitar, and Roger Manning's inventive keyboards, this tale of an unloved and unhappy drifter pining for companionship is the perfect opener.

The differing versions of "Difficult" perfectly illustrate *The Divorce Album's* "Mine" and "Yours" concept. The "Mine" version, sung with fervor by Jimm McIver, and played by, among others, Roger Manning and Linus Dotson, barrels forward as a questioning of a partner's attitude ("Why do you have to be so/Difficult") and a sad assessment of faulty character: "You can be sentimental/When you're not so judgmental/You can be fascinating/When you're not calculating/I will be damned if I knew/What I did to deserve you."

The "Yours" version of "Difficult" turns the tables on the song's concept with a decidedly softer sound and a rewritten lyric espousing the female point of view. This, and there is no other way to say it, lovely version, co-written by the Corner Laughers' Karla Kane and Steven Fox, takes a more mannered approach to sizing up the situation: "When I get your attention/You call me a drama queen/But you're thriving on the tension/Of me wondering what you mean."

Of course, "Castaway" and "Difficult" only scratch the surface of the power of *The Divorce Album*. And it should be said that not every song on this record chronicles the art of the breakup. In fact, "Undeniably Blue," a beat-driven pop-rocker anchored by Roger Manning's vocal and instrumental prowess, Reade Pryor's insistent drumming, and Rich Hinman's fluid pedal steel, offers a welcome, positive outlook–a lifeline for the sad and lonely: "Undeniably you will see/The world is quite forgiving (Yes it is!)/Even when you're down/The sky above is undeniably blue/With a little time you'll see/The end of undeniably blue."

Steven Fox, who plays instruments on every one of this album's songs, is a bit of a musical maverick, in that each of his albums exists on a different plane, even as they are connected as repositories for beautifully written, melodic songs. I always look forward to his offerings, and marvel at their ability to surprise and delight in equal measure. You, I suspect, will too.

Steven Fox *guests tomorrow night at 9 pm ET* on Pure Pop Radio: In Conversation. (9 pm ET on Pop that Goes Crunch Radio.)

■ **Where to Get It:** Secret Friend's *The Divorce Album* will be available beginning this Friday, April 6, from a variety of online retailers, including iTunes, Amazon, and Tidal (*The Divorce Album* is a digital-only release). Check back on Friday for the link to an information-rich website you can get lost in and from which you can order this album.

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