

Charlotte Gainsbourg □ – Take 2 (2018)

Written by bluelover

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1 Such A Remarkable Day 3:37 2 Bombs Away 3:47 3 Lost Lenore 4:45 4 Runaway (Live Version) 3:11 5 Deadly Valentine (Live Version) 7:36

Though an accomplished actress, the French star fails to sell her cover of Kanye West’s “Runaway” on an EP that otherwise amounts to a deserved victory lap.

Whether you blame Keanu Reeves and his grunge band Dogstar, DMX and his turn in *Romeo Must Die*, or any other entertainer who tries to parlay musical success into movies or vice versa, the public seems to have a general suspicion of that particular crossover, as if the two arts must sit eternally apart. Since making her film and music debuts in 1984, Charlotte Gainsbourg has been a pointed counterargument to this stubborn belief. She seems to ladle her voice and on-screen performances out of the same dramatic well, a sense captured by her gift for interpreting songs so that you believe them. “Lemon Incest,” her 1984 single alongside late father Serge Gainsbourg, prompted French scandal, as an entire nation seemed to fall for its provocative suggestion of pedophilia.

Take 2, the five-track follow-up to 2017’s excellent *Rest*, brings Gainsbourg’s interpretive skills to the fore with mixed results. Produced by French techno star SebastiAn, Take 2 includes a few brilliant cuts, but the most notable surprise, a live cover of Kanye West’s searing mea culpa “Runaway,” feels disingenuous. Gainsbourg replaces the air of bombastic apology with the atmosphere of cocktail-hour soul, the stuff you would tune out in the lobby of an upscale hotel. So often an instrument of understated tension, her breathy voice and cut-glass accent feel meager and meek; she doesn’t sell her own appeal to Kanye’s rogues’ gallery of douchebags, scumbags, and assholes. Swapping the original’s puffed-up charm for wafty synths and apologetic drums, the music follows her down.

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At least the other live track, a take on Rest's "Deadly Valentine," fares better. Onstage, Gainsbourg can be restrained to the point of seeming timid, not prone to flights of vocal fancy. The first four minutes feel superfluous here, only slightly muddying the original's edges. At the end, though, Gainsbourg's band delivers an immaculately built freak-out; the nerve-shredding string rises are probably the closest Gainsbourg will get to the detuned power of the Velvet Underground.

For the EP's three studio originals, Gainsbourg reprises the mixture of dramatic tension and disco fantasy that make Rest a lingering joy. "Such a Remarkable Day" combines a magnetic harpsichord line that nods to Serge Gainsbourg's own 1960s work with florid synths and strutting disco drums. Gainsbourg relates the kind of tersely mysterious prose that could double as a promotional pitch for a classic spy film: "There's blood on your hands either way/How can we ever pay your due?" During the similarly melodramatic "Bombs Away," she undercuts the song's underlying tension with an air of sly humor, infusing the spoken-word bridge ("The Queen is marching back to Paris tonight/The priests are praying and preparing the rites") with campy intensity. "Lost Lenore," meanwhile, mixes orchestral splendor with creeping menace, Gainsbourg's theatrical whisper the sugar dusting atop a rich mix of bells, horns, and clavinet.

Familiar sounds win out on Take 2, so the EP feels largely like a post-Rest victory lap. Sure, the hopes might have been high for some full-blooded and unorthodox take on Kanye, but Gainsbourg instead dwells in Rest's sweetly dramatic glory. As every good actor knows, there's much to be said for taking your bow when the audience demands. ---Ben Cardew, pitchfork.com

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