

KELLY SLOAN *Insides Out*

If what we see in another person is a picture made up of all their personal experiences, feelings, and inclinations, Kelly Sloan would be one of those collages that look like one big thing from a distance, but when you look more closely you see that it's made up of hundreds of smaller pictures. Her music is the result of heartfelt, honest attempts to make sense of a wildly varied career in music and life, somehow arriving at a coherent – and in this case, downright elegant – artistic statement. *Insides Out* is the latest album from Toronto-based singer, songwriter, and musician Kelly Sloan, presenting nine glistening tracks that pair classic piano-led pop songwriting with warm, enveloping atmospherics and tasteful playing from some of the city's finest musicians. The album was produced by Jeff McMurrich, a prolific collaborative force who has shepherded critically acclaimed albums by the likes of Jennifer Castle, U.S. Girls, and Owen Pallett.

Sloan's music does share certain characteristics with some of the leading lights of the last decade's female-fronted singer-songwriter resurgence (Sharon Van Etten, Big Thief, Angel Olsen), but she actually has far more in common with titans of the form from previous generations. The essence of classic '70s acts like Carole King, Rita Coolidge, and Stevie Nicks are conjured, and '90s-era women in song such as Tori Amos and Natalie Merchant may also come to mind, but the record is far from any sort of retro exercise. Sloan's nimble melodic sense, at once playful *and* melancholic (see “Russian Smile” and “I Wanna Wake Up”) also recalls more contemporary pop songsmiths like Jenny Lewis, and Natalie Mehring (aka Weyes Blood), and she has that enviable knack for writing songs that sound familiar at first glance, but on closer inspection, really couldn't have been written by anyone but her.

Sonically, the album is a joy to behold, with a winning blend of intimacy, drifting atmospherics, and – when needed – warm, punchy instrumentation. Certain tracks are delivered perfectly with just the bedrock of Sloan's piano and voice, but other songs benefit from crucial contributions by other players drawn from the Toronto scene, including Matthew 'Doc' Dunn on vibraphone, cellist/vocalist Eliza Niemi, bassist Mike Smith (Eucalyptus), and drummer Kieran Adams (the Weather Station, Sarah Harmer). The drums and bass in particular help conjure some of that burnished '70s feel – heard to great effect on opening track “Warm Enough” – but Sloan's voice, obviously a formidable instrument itself, is treated to an array of tasteful effects and recording techniques that offer the songs a gossamer-like veneer and create a slight bit of remove from the first-person directness that one may associate with your average singer-songwriter album. “No Worse Way To Go” provides an aesthetic contrast to the majority of the piano-bass-drums format of the album, instead sounding like Kate Bush recorded in an intimate bedroom studio, with soft drum machine rhythms underpinning reverberating piano chords and washes of electronic sounds.

Sloan is a classically trained vocalist with years of experience as a professional singer in a staggering variety of contexts, from work as a soloist with the Dalhousie Russian choir to country & western musical theatre revues to other work in the indie-pop-folk realm, such as the Alias Ensemble, her recent English-folk-infused collaboration with Dave Nardi and the chameleonic Daniel Romano. In the world of pop music, this training can almost act as a hindrance in less capable hands, but Sloan's voice here is a glorious, emotive anchor to the tasteful surroundings cooked up by McMurrich and her supporting cast of musicians.

The lyrical threads weaving together the songs on the aptly titled *Insides Out* are largely introspective meditations, and although they sometimes begin in a darker place, Sloan says “I tend not to write depressing songs from start to finish. They generally seem to have an encouraging nudge, an uplifting hook, or at least a pleasant resignation.” As with the best pop music, these less-than-sunny sentiments are contrasted with warm, glowing musical surroundings, and as such the music on *Insides Out* definitely does not exist in a downcast light. To this end, Sloan recalls a chat with her cousin, who observed that “my songs don't make people feel sad. They make people feel OK about their sadness.”

Insides Out is an album that will undoubtedly make you feel more than just OK, for a whole bunch of good reasons. It is available _____ on Victory Pool Records, wherever you buy or stream music.

(Chris Dudge, 2023)