

ALBUM REVIEW

Scant Innovation Across an Ostensibly Amateur Set



MOLLY NILSSON
Amateur

★★★★★

/ DARK SKIES ASSOCIATION
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The peril inherent in such a tightly corseted concept is, of course, that one rather heightens the risk of lapsing into repetition.

BY NICOLA J. ROOS / PHOTO: PRESS PHOTO

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“Try doing something that isn’t necessary — something superfluous, something wilfully pointless!” Thus spoke Queen Margrethe in her New Year’s address eight years ago, a line that has since lodged itself in the popular consciousness. It is, in many ways, the amateur’s creed: the dictum of someone who devotes themselves to a pursuit largely out of affection, curiosity, or sheer bloody-minded devotion.

In an age obsessed with metrics, optimisation, and the relentless burnishing of one’s professional sheen, declaring oneself an amateur can feel almost insurgent — a small but telling act of defiance against the tyranny of the CV. As a musical motif, however, it is hardly fresh terrain. Molly Nilsson is far from the first to navigate it; artists such as Half Japanese, Daniel Johnston, and Belle & Sebastian have all tilled this soil before her. But it now appears to be Nilsson’s turn, elevated to the organising principle of her newest record, *Amateur*.

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Stylistically, she leans — quite knowingly — into what one might call “deluxe karaoke”. Live, she performs solely with vocals; everything else is piped in via backing tracks. Lyrically, she often smuggles in a political barb or two. In this respect, she is something of a rare bird on the indie-synthpop circuit. Most of the tracks on *Amateur* are quintessentially Molly Nilsson: she treads that fine, hairline ridge between indie earnestness, kitsch indulgence, and outright cliché — more often than not with considerable aplomb. The prevailing ethos is very much *don’t bore us, get to the chorus*; several songs dispense with a preamble altogether, plunging straight in and carrying on with steady resolve until they simply... stop.

What she has, unquestionably, is a preternatural ear for an indelible pop melody, and I’ve been thoroughly taken with many of her earlier releases. The sonics remain disciplined, almost ascetically so — and therein lies the risk. The danger of such a readily recognisable aesthetic is that much of the new material could, in theory, have been lifted wholesale from previous albums: the ever-layered, reverb-swaddled vocals; the often Casio-adjacent (some might say gleefully cheesy) keyboards; and the drum machines whose devotion to monotony borders on a philosophical stance.

There are, to be fair, a few partial detours: “Classified”, with its unmistakable house inflections, and “Get a Life”, which is classic Nilsson in spirit but hammered forward by heavy/punk drum patterns. Their strategic placement on the album suggests Nilsson is perfectly aware that the spell occasionally needs to be broken — that the deck must, at times, be reshuffled.

I’ve long anticipated the arrival of *Amateur*. Nilsson is remarkably consistent, issuing a new album roughly every other year. The standard has generally been strong, and there is certainly much to enjoy here. New listeners are in for a treat. But for those already familiar with her back catalogue, one might — perhaps paradoxically, given the album’s ostensible celebration of amateurism — have hoped for slightly grander ambitions, a touch more audacity, and a willingness to push her unmistakable aesthetic into territory with greater heft and refinement.

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