**CARYS // *To Anyone Like Me***

The best pop music is a deep dive into contrasts: joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, midnight and morning. But sleight of hand is essential, so that those depths are masked by a deceptively sparkling surface. That duality is what makes pop timeless, beguiling. And it’s the very essence of CARYS’s hotly anticipated major label debut EP, *To Anyone Like Me*.

CARYS’s music is already a study in juxtapositions. Her smash single “Princesses Don’t Cry” racked up an astonishing 71 million-plus spins fueled by an incredible viral run of user generated content on TikTok since 2019, granting the Toronto-based singer/songwriter worldwide and very mainstream exposure for a song boldly shattering… wait for it… stale feminine myths about internalizing pain and bravely smiling through tears.

Yet ask CARYS — a.k.a. Aviva Mongillo, also an acclaimed actor with marquee roles in small-screen gems like *Workin’ Moms* and *Backstage* — to sum up the dazzling, exquisitely produced, and multilayered *To Anyone Like Me* in an elevator pitch, and she doesn’t miss a beat. “It sounds like candy,” she says, “and it feels like love.”

That is *To Anyone Like Me* in a nutshell. Beneath its gleaming exterior and almost ridiculously sticky melodies lurks the most wondrous/villainous, coveted/scary emotion known to humankind. Talk about darkness and light. *To Anyone Like Me* is pure pop personified, instantly accessible yet ocean-deep.

“When I was writing this EP, it felt like it was coming from a positive and loving place,” CARYS says. “But listening to it after the fact, I see how much of it reflects my need for validation. When I hear the EP now, I hear sadness in the songs.”

CARYS says, “The subtext to the overall message is that people need to accept themselves for who they are. You don’t need validation from other people to feel worthy of existing. I’ve had to learn that lesson. So, while the EP seems to be about love and sunsets and beauty, it’s also about feeling whole.”

Take latest single “Crush,” which drapes the most arbitrary and immediate of human feelings across a slowly building groove propelled by a thousand points of shimmering sonic light (also by guitar and synth) as our knock-kneed protagonist wobbles between giddy joy (“Are we going to kiss right now?”) and abject terror (“I’m kinda freaking the fuck out.”)

CARYS continues: “I’m kind of a messy songwriter. I just try to tune into whatever room I am in and pick up on melodies or lyrics from the divine. It’s so random, not methodical but lately I am trying to build more technical skills. I don’t consciously plan things out; I chase whatever comes to my head. So yeah,” she laughs, “I have about a million Voice Memos in my phone.”

Despite its polished veneer, *To Anyone Like Me* explores formidable themes of self-reliance and female empowerment. Take the aforementioned “Princesses Don’t Cry” which upends the stuff upper lip ethos of fairy tales while referencing *The Princess and the Pea* fable in its video for good measure.

Likewise, the irresistibly buoyant, neon-bright “No More” — already a runaway hit — flatly rejects standard-issue relationship deference, instead opting for celebration of independence, while cutting an addictive groove along the way.

“Growing up, I was very aware of how different things were expected of me,” CARYS offers, confirming that she has always written, with short stories eventually morphing into songs around the time she discovered Taylor Swift, Avril Lavigne, and Celine Dion.

“I’m the type of person who, in high school, wouldn’t shave her legs because I knew it would upset some people. It was a statement,” she laughs. “But maybe even more than that, I am someone who rejects rules about how to be a person. I mean, why do those things even matter?

“That said, I had my moments where I was a people pleaser. But seeing someone like Harry Styles for example, who is just himself and refuses to be put in any kind of box, is very inspiring to me.”

A similarly grounded view informs CARYS’s perception of the incredible viral run “Princesses Don’t Cry” had on TikTok, which she confesses took her by surprise but raised important questions about self and self-awareness.

“When ‘Princesses Don’t Cry’ blew up, it was cool. But it was also a song I wrote when I was 17. I’m 22 now. At the time it felt polarizing but now I see it as the greatest thing ever because it made me realize I was trying to erase my past. It forced me to say, ‘You are Aviva *and* you are CARYS. You can’t run from yourself.’ It made me think I am the luckiest person alive and led me to writing music that was emotional but also playful and very sincere.

“I hope this EP can create a community in my fanbase,” CARYS says when asked her highest hopes for *To Anyone Like Me*. “Lots of people know ‘Princesses Don’t Cry’ but don’t know the rest of my music. I have fans from *Backstage* who don’t know I *make* music. It would be great if people could see the whole me.

“And in many ways, it already feels successful. I get to do what I love. Anything on top of that is a bonus. Honestly, if this is it and I go no farther, I have succeeded. I always wanted to do this, and now I am doing it... even though I am still living in my parents’ basement!”

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