

## Ana Popovic - Unconditional (2011)

Written by bluesever

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01 – Fearless Blues 02 – Count Me In 03 – Unconditional [play](#) 04 – Reset Rewind 05 – Slideshow 06 – Business As Usual 07 – Your Love Ain't Real 08 – Work Song 09 – Summer Rain 10 – Voodoo Woman

[play](#)

11 – One Room Country Shack 12 – Soulful Dress

Personnel: Ana Popovic - Guitars, Slide Guitar, Vocals Sonny Landreth - Slide Guitar Jason Ricci - Harmonica Jon Cleary - Keyboards David Torkanowski - Keyboards Calvin Turner - Bass Doug Belote - Drums Leon "Kid Chocolate" Brown - Trumpet Tom Fitzpatrick - Saxophone Jerome Alexander - Vocals (Background) Avist Martin Mycartery "Scooter" Groce - Vocals (Background)

There are a lot of guitar heroes in the blues world, but very few of them are women, and very few of them were born in Serbia. There is only one Serbian-born female guitar hero in the blues, and that is Ana Popovic. Over the last ten years, Popovic has released six albums and toured constantly, building up a reputation as one of the hottest axe young axe slingers in the game, and as a pretty decent songwriter to boot.

She is not a blues purist. Growing up with a father who played music and who introduced her to a wide variety of forms, Popovic took the blues as grounding for all the music she likes. Yes, there is rock, and soul, and jazz in her playing, but she feels it all as blues. As she says in the liner notes to her new album, "Blues is UNCONDITIONAL, maybe the most conservative style of all. If you alter it too much, it will no longer be blues." Popovic has pushed the boundaries, to be sure, but she remains a blues artist even when her guitar is screaming and the band is sounding more like rock.

Which is not to say that her new album – easily her rootsiest endeavor to date – isn't a welcome

relief from some of the overdriven stuff that she's done before; Popovic headed down to New Orleans and recorded with some very fine musicians, most notably the incredible pianist Jon Cleary. (You may have seen Cleary appear on episodes of HBO's Treme series.) Bassist Calvin Turner and drummer Doug Belote can and occasionally do pump up the jams the way Popovic fans expect, but they also can do more with less, giving her the chance to expose some more nuanced approaches.

Eight of the twelve songs on Unconditional are Popovic originals, and they work better than at least three of the four covers. The album opens with "Fearless Blues," a statement of purpose from Popovic which starts with a tough verse backed by acoustic guitar before the band kicks in and a gospel-inspired male backing chorus adds spirit to Popovic's gutsy incantations. "I am fearless, fearless, fearless, I will reach reach reach the higher ground," she cries, and you know she will get there, too.

"Count Me In" is an explosion of Popovic's typical power, but with guest starring harmonica virtuoso Jason Ricci on board, the song burns with controlled passion. Popovic and Ricci are perfect foils for each other; they both play hard and aggressive, they both flirt with new ideas while staying true to blues roots, and they both love thick, juicy, overdriven tones on their instruments. Popovic sings this one with an abandon to match the instrumental parts, and the song is among the three or four best on the record. Another high point is "Slideshow," in which Popovic teams with slide guitar genius Sonny Landreth, and matches him lick for lick. This instrumental, played at white heat intensity, is testament to Popovic's skills as a mimic. It's virtually impossible to tell which guitarist plays which, despite Landreth possessing one of the most instantly identifiable guitar tones in the world.

"Business As Usual," a song Popovic co-wrote with her husband Mark van Meurs, is a beautiful, questioning piece about two lovers who have lost their passion for each other. Popovic takes a delicate approach to her vocal, making it clear the singer feels as much to blame as her lover, and then pulls back for a tender, very sexy guitar solo which builds to an explosive climax which implies it's possible to regain that thrill. But when she sings the last verse, the problems remain. Masterful number. Popovic outdoes herself covering Mercy Dee Walton's "One Room Country Shack." This slow blues benefits from Cleary's warm-toned organ setting the mood, and Popovic's tightly clipped, stinging guitar adds to the oppressive feel. She sings with a true feeling of the loneliness and emptiness of that one room country shack. Her guitar turns to a more liquid approach in the second verse, more desperate, more full of desire. Cleary's piano solo is devastating and desolate, and Popovic's guitar solo after the third verse comes from the very depths of her soul, completely alone, longing for any kind of connection. Finally, the guitar and vocal on the last verse explode together in a blues catharsis which feels absolutely earned.

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The other cover material doesn't work quite as well. "Soulful Dress," best known by Marcia Ball, is punchy and fun, but Nat Adderley's "Work Song," in the vocal version originated by Oscar Brown, Jr. feels perfunctory. Popovic studied jazz guitar, but she oversells it here. Much better is Cleary's pleasant negotiation of the changes on his solo. Koko Taylor's "Voodoo Woman" gets a strong Earl Palmer-style backbeat, and Popovic's slide guitar work is stellar, but Demetria Taylor had way more fun with this song on Bad Girl. Popovic may not be comfortable enough with voodoo metaphors; her original material is always more directly expressive of what she means to say. ---- blues.about.com

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