This surreal and wildly ambitious project began quite humbly in 1988 when Greif found an old three-LP audio book of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* at a thrift store and began idly warping and enhancing it. Sometime afterward, he submitted an unrelated cassette to Staalplaat with some of those experiments on the back side and they offered to release the *Alice* material instead of the intended work. Originally released only as a series of five limited-edition albums in the early '90s, this sprawling epic quickly became Greif’s most well-known and enduring work. Appropriately, it has now been reissued as a rather striking box set for the second time.

**Soleilmoon**

Randy Grief began making music in the 1970s, but he first came into relative prominence with the launch of his Swinging Axe Productions label in 1983, which released early works by Controlled Bleeding and Merzbow. That early stint in America's very lonely noise cassette underground left a lasting impression on his aesthetic over the years, despite the fact that he soon began finding inspiration in literature, exotic field recordings, and musique concrète. As a result, the stylistic stew here is a very eclectic one, blending radio serials, tape loop cut-ups, avant garde classical cacophony, clanking early industrial textures, horror movie soundtracks, and brooding ambient over the course of six mind-bending hours (and not especially seamlessly). Despite that clumsiness (and, of course, the technological limitations inherent in making computer-based music two decades ago), *Alice in Wonderland* is a spectacular achievement.

Greif faced a number of unusual hurdles with this project. The first, naturally, is the sheer scope of the material: not many musicians have the imagination, attention-span, and patience necessary to make a coherent six-hour-long soundscape with very little reliance on repetition. In fact, Randy himself has stated that the project probably never would have been finished if he hadn't committed to it in advance (the whole thing took him 5 years to finish). The second difficulty is that Greif found the tone of the narration to be too even for his liking, so he needed to force some dynamism into it without sacrificing intelligibility, flow, and coherence. The third (and most substantial) problem is that Carroll's story was already perfectly fine without some experimental musician from LA messing around with it. Improving upon something that is already complete (and a literary classic besides) is no simple feat: Greif had to find a way to add music without detracting or distracting from the text while also avoiding the peril of being utterly
eclipsed by it. The route that Randy wisely chose was to texturally highlight and emphasize the darker side that was already there.

While it is very easy to pick out some rather dated textures, bombastic moments, or bloated individual pieces over the five CDs, the whole is often quite successful. Greif exercises a great deal of tact, largely allowing the narration to continue unmolested and seldom plunging into lengthy instrumental stretches. That linearly unfolding thread prevents the album from ever losing much momentum or being derailed by much in the way of self-indulgence. Also, that same stream of words provides much grist for Grief's accompaniment: most of the creative heavy lifting on the album involves the skillful and aggressive manipulation of the actors' voices, surrounding the narration with disjointed phonemes, pitch-shifting, panning, backwards voices, and sundry other neat tricks. On the rare occasions when Randy does attack the actual narrative flow, he generally does it to supremely hallucinatory effect, making Alice and her friends sound submerged, fragmented, or narcotically slowed-down when it suits the story.

As for the music underneath it all, Greif is all over the place. The shimmering and droning ambient passages still sound fairly contemporary today, but some of the harsher or more rhythmic pieces can be a bit jarring or too rooted in late '80s industrial/noise music for my liking: plodding drum machines with lots of reverb, very artificial-sounding synthesizers, etc. However, it all perversely works somehow, as the resulting dissonance and disorientation serve the themes of the story quite well. Also, Greif definitely succeeded in giving the story a compelling dynamic arc, as his clanging rhythms and garish sound colors bring a great deal of animation and tension to the more action-packed parts of the tale, which in turn heightens the impact of the woozier, more drugged-sounding passages.

Before hearing this album, I had never thought that the story of Alice in Wonderland held much interest for me as an adult. However, Greif has done a truly remarkable job in emphasizing its more unsettling, creepy, and Kafkaesque elements in a thoroughly compelling and imaginative way. Despite its occasional missteps and some ravaging from time, the cumulative power of this album is massive. In fact, it is difficult to imagine experiencing Alice in installments over the course of several years as its original listeners did—a boxed set is the only logical format for this release. Of course, six solid of hours of mechanized psychedelia is certainly exhausting, but so is spending a week in a foreign county: total immersion seems like the only way to fully experience a work this singular and consuming. Many people have called this album a classic over the years and I don't disagree, but this is something more than a great album: this is a complete, self-enclosed sound world.
Brainwashed - Randy Greif, "Alice in Wonderland"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Samples:

- The Rabbit Hole
- A Pool of Tears
- The Dream of Wonderland