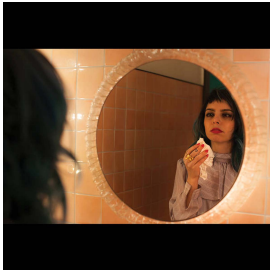


Brainwashed - TALSounds, "Lovesick"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Natalie Chami is best known for being one-third of Chicago's Good Willsmith, but she has also been a prolific solo artist, releasing a slew of cassettes on labels like Hausu Mountain since 2011. *Love Sick* is Chami's debut full-length and it is quite a stunner: based on Chami's past, I was merely expecting a suite of atypically skillful analog synth sketches and experiments. Instead, *Love Sick* is a gorgeously sultry and blearily hypnagogic feast of visionary outsider soul. Happily, most of Chami's experimental and improvisatory impulses survived that transformation intact, which is what makes this such a unique album: Chami does not downplay her more lysergic and unpredictable edges so much as find a way to shape them into languorously seductive hooks. When that happens, some great songs result, yet the more impressive achievement is how *Love Sick* coheres into such an intermittently dark and absorbing whole, like an erotic dream that subtly morphs into a nightmare.

[Ba Da Bing!](#)

Chami has quite an unusual background for someone making a sexy bedroom soul album, as she is both a member of an established improv/experimental music ensemble and a classically trained vocalist. The latter seems to only manifest itself in Chami's cool assurance as a vocalist, but her experience as an improviser/analog synth artist clearly had a lot of influence over how *Love Sick* was performed and recorded. Aesthetically, however, Chami seems to be far more of a kindred spirit to her stated influences Aaliyah and Sade than, say, Alessandro Cortini. *Love Sick's* simple template is established quite quickly and effectively with the opening "I Saw The Way": a lovely, slow-moving chord progression; some understated synth hooks; some hallucinatory textures fluttering around the periphery; and a whole lot of cooing, breathy vocals. One significant item that is missing from that list is any kind of beat or propulsive bass line, which seems like a very deliberate decision for a couple of reasons. For one, Chami took a very pure, organic, and spontaneous approach to crafting these pieces, performing everything live and improvising her loop-heavy vocals with no overdubbing. More significantly, her entire aesthetic is a deeply understated and blissed out one. *Love Sick* certainly has a lot in common with pop music, but it does not sound so much like sexy R&B as it does like sexy R&B that has been dissolved into an undulating haze. Chami's aesthetic is essentially a bittersweet dreamscape of simmering passions, yearning, and languorous eroticism.

Occasionally, however, Chami *will* throw in a sampled beat, as she does on the stumbling and stutteringly gorgeous would-be single "Disgrace." If the vocals were removed, it would basically just be a killer patch of densely throbbing bleeps and chirps over a lurching, broken-sounding beat that would be a highlight on any contemporary analog synth album. In Chami's hands, however, it becomes a rapturous bit of hallucinatory pop heaven filled with lush harmonies and oddly halting and precarious-sounding vocal phrasings. As much as I enjoy Chami's endless supply of cool synth motifs and her talent for crafting appealing hooks, it is probably the almost uncomfortable intimacy of her vocals that elevates *Love Sick*

into such a compelling album. At her best, Chami is not a synth wizard dabbling in soul/R&B pastiche—she is a bedroom pop Brian Wilson trying to distill a swirl of ineffable emotions into elegantly woozy, blurred, and breathy dreampop (and she just happens to wield a synth quite skillfully too).

Chami is not entirely pop-minded though, so *Love Sick* is also peppered with some more atmospheric pieces and an occasional bit of indulgent spacey weirdness, such as the lysergic and proggy "You're Trying To Drive." I tend to like the "pop" songs the best though, as there are already plenty of artists making fine dreamy ambient or retro-futurist analog synth vamps, but no one but Chami (and perhaps prime LA Vampires) can turn out a soulful and sensuous slow-motion jam quite like "My Side My Sign." That said, some *Love Sick*

's more abstract pieces are uniquely strange, particularly the closing "Stories," which is a surreal miasma of hallucinatory textures, blurring synth swells, tumbling melodies, and pure heartache. In fact, it is a perfectly devastating way to end the album, as it feels like all of the album's gorgeous soft-focus pop structures are ultimately pulled apart and obliterated by a final black hole of regret that ends with the line "I don't want to tell the story anymore cuz you're gone." On paper, that might sound like melodrama, but it is not. Instead, it feels like a final curdled note on an album that seems to try valiantly to condense all the pleasure and pain of a shared life into one short album.

To my ears, *Love Sick* does not have any real flaws or weak songs, but it can certainly be a challenging and unnervingly intimate listen at times and most of the usual caveats regarding improvised music apply. That said, Chami often does a remarkable job of deftly sidestepping the limitations of live analog synthesizer performance, masking the unavoidably repetitive structure with well-placed hooks, actual choruses, and hallucinatory gnarled intrusions of mangled notes. Also, while I certainly prefer the more structured and melodic pieces, *Love Sick*

's more amorphous and atmospheric pieces make the album a far more mysterious and deep affair than it would have been if Chami had simply written a full album of slow jams. Of course, the hookier pieces are the immediately gratifying ones, so it took me a while to appreciate the rest, but it was worth the time (it is dangerously easy to initially dismiss the album as a handful

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of great songs padded by moody filler).

Love Sick

is a slow-burner, as it has sneakily become one of my left-field favorite albums of the year, hitting a perfect balance between experimentation, craftsmanship, unfiltered emotion, and smoldering intensity. I am tempted to glibly describe

Love Sick

as the greatest analog synth break-up album of all-time, but that would be a disservice (even if it is probably true): Chami certainly uses heartache and longing as a starting point, but beautifully transcends expectations to weave a truly immersive and complex fever dream where eroticism and pain swirl deliriously together.

Samples:

- [I Saw The Way](#)
- [Disgrace](#)
- [My Side My Side](#)