

Brainwashed - Razen, "The Xvoto Reels"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 03 December 2017 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 04 December 2017 14:34



As a devout fan of drone's weirder fringes, I was casually aware of Razen before this album, but I had never taken the time to dive particularly deeply into their bizarre sonic sorcery: Brecht Ameel & Kim Delcour have historically erred a bit too much on the side of shrillness for my taste. I certainly admired their frayed, idiosyncratic, and somewhat unhinged approach to the genre, but it still made for a somewhat rough listen. This latest release, their first for Three:Four, falls quite squarely in my comfort zone though. For one, there are no bagpipes or modular synths to be found, just an organ and a curious array of traditional acoustic instruments spanning several cultures. More importantly, the band believes that "a presence" surfaced in the church where they recorded these improvisations and that the resulting tapes were supernaturally altered in some way. I am not a big believer in the spirit world, but whatever transpired certainly led to a uniquely compelling album, as the best pieces on *The Xvoto Reels* take ritualistic acoustic drone to a wonderfully hallucinatory and haunting place.

[Three:Four Records](#)

The original recordings for this album were made back in August of 2015 at St. Martin's Church in Asse, Belgium. The church has quite an interesting history, as no one quite knows when it was built. In theory, it is at least a thousand years old, but it was apparently destroyed and rebuilt several times as various wars swept through the region. I suppose that makes it as fertile a location for a good haunting as practically anywhere, but the particular spirit that Razen (here expanded to a five-piece) encountered was far more subtle than your usual phantasm, manifesting its presence solely in unusual dynamic transformations and bizarre acoustic phenomena. According to the band, the resultant recordings were perplexingly unrecognizable documents of the actual performances that occurred, as the usual Razen elements of "randomness, unexpectedness and irrationality" were all dramatically heightened. It was certainly kind of the apparition to be so sympathetic to Razen's established aesthetic, as a less sensitive ghost my have tried to add beats or something. In any case, there are definitely some strange harmonies and overtones swirling above these languorous ragas, so there is no denying that the church had an unusual and distinctive acoustic character that played a significant role. There are also some more obvious dub-like flourishes to be found as well, as erratic shifts or disruptions in tape speed occasionally appear throughout *Xvoto*. I suppose that is a cool touch to some degree, yet the eerily beautiful music itself is far more compelling than trying to spot the handiwork of any sonic phantoms that may have been fluttering around the

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rafters. Also, on pieces like "Ash Reversal," Razen's swirling haze of dissonant recorder and organ harmonies is legitimately spine-chilling without any extra occult intervention being needed.

As much as I enjoy those darker moments, the true beauty of *The Xvoto Reels* lies in its more transcendent and ritualistic pieces, as pieces like "Dunes Spell Runes on the Edge of Town" feel like they could be impossible field recordings of ancient pagan ceremonies. Razen also have a real genius for balancing the sublime with the ragged and gnarled, a mesmerizing tightrope act best illustrated by "Rover Fortunes," as the higher notes sometimes dissolve into distorted sizzle and Pieter Lenaerts's churning and moaning upright bass sounds absolutely feral. That particular piece is probably where Razen cross the line into absolute goddamn genius, as it is essentially a wonderful drone piece that unpredictably shudders and undulates like a living entity...while individual notes unexpectedly transform into howls of anguish...and a roiling and snarling undercurrent threatens to tear the whole thing apart. It is truly epic. The closing "Death Reel" is another stunner, albeit a more understated one. It kind of sounds like Razen somehow isolated just the eerie harmonics from Tuvan throat-singing, resulting in a ghostly whine that drifts through a warmly melancholic bed of tape hiss, droning strings, tender recorder melodies, and clattering tablas. It is exactly the kind of dreamlike, hypnotic Eastern-influenced drone that I could easily listen to in an infinite loop, but the entity lurking in St. Martin's apparently had other plans: as the title cryptically alludes to, the tape grows increasingly garbled and then abruptly falls completely silent around the ten-minute mark. It is certainly an abrupt end, but ten minutes of sustained drone nirvana is still ten minutes of sustained drone nirvana.

Interestingly, Ameel and Delcour considered not releasing this album, as they felt it was "too personal, intimate and obscure to let out into the world...the sound of a deeply private dream, a message from the subconscious." It is hard to imagine any other band recording their masterpiece, then debating about whether it is morally acceptable to allow others to hear it, but Razen are quite a unique duo and I believe them. Skepticism towards the supernatural aside, something special undeniably did happen on that day. I have no idea if Razen channeled the divine (with some additional help from the surrounding architecture and a malfunctioning tape), yet the confluence of chance, mysterious variables, and genuine inspiration resulted an album that is on a whole different plane than anything else I have heard from them. This is as soulful and transcendent as drone gets. Of course, an album like *The Xvoto Reels* could not have happened if Razen had not set the stage for it, as it feels like Ameel and Delcour have been shuffling around strange and mismatched puzzle pieces for a while and finally got them to all fit together by casting aside all traces of the modern, finding some like-minded collaborators, and diving deep into a half-real/half-imagined ancient past. As a result, this album would have probably been a huge breakthrough even if it were recorded under completely mundane circumstances. Instead, Razen have somehow managed to achieve something even better still: a visionary record that sounds like the secret ecstatic recordings of a long-forgotten religious sect.

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Samples:

- [Dunes Spell Runes on the Edge of Town](#)
- [Rover Fortunes](#)
- [Death Reel](#)