

Brainwashed - Gnod, "Chapel Perilous"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Gnod's previous full-length, 2017's *Just Say No...*, was a feast of gloriously thuggish and focused brutality, but it was bit of an outlier for the shape-shifting psych collective from Salford. Consequently, I was a fool to expect *Chapel Perilous*

to continue along the same lines, as Gnod is an entity in a constant state of explosive reinvention. There are a couple of lingering shadows of *Just Say No*

's aesthetic in *Chapel Perilous*

's lengthy bookends, however, as this album partially took shape as Gnod were touring in *No*

's wake. For the most part, *Chapel Perilous*

is a completely different animal though, deconstructing the band's more hostile side into something a bit more seething, sprawling, indulgent, and experimental. That makes this release more of an uneven, fitfully inspired detour than a great album, but it still manages to kick open a few new doors in decisive fashion.

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Gnod is unquestionably one of the most exciting and reliably compelling bands around right now, but I have absolutely no idea what the hell they were thinking when they decided to record "Donovan's Daughters" and release it as the opening song on their latest album. Initially, however, it sounds like a very cool and slow-building extension of *Just Say No*'s winning "scariest and more muscular Gang of Four" aesthetic: a throbbing bassline, skittering drums, slashing guitar chords, and an occasional dub-inspired electronic flourish. It sounds great, but starts to go a little south once the repetitive, snarling vocals come into the picture. Despite that, it boasts some wonderfully see-sawing guitar chaos and appealingly wild drumming, so it maintains enough heaviness and momentum to transcend some of its songcraft shortcomings...for a while, anyway. After about six minutes, the bottom drops out and it transforms into something resembling a roiling and pummelingly repetitive outro. If it ended with that, "Donovan's Daughters" would still be a fine song, but it instead morphs into something that

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lies somewhere between a perplexing White Hills pastiche and bad hard rock that turns the final five minutes of the song into an unlistenable slog for me. I have no idea what would possess a band to extend a good song into fifteen minutes by tacking on a completely different and significantly less enjoyable song. It feels like a perverse celebration of everything I hate about prog rock with none of the rewards: a very long song with multiple movements, yet little nuance, coherent sense of meaningful progression, or real depth.

Thankfully, Paddy Shine and company manage to right the ship with the following "Europa," a starkly experimental and eerie instrumental piece built from decaying bass pulses, moody guitar swells, lysergic dub touches, and an enigmatic vocal sample that repeatedly urges the world to go back to reason. To my ears, it is by far the most memorable and stellar piece on the album, but the remaining three pieces have their charm as well. "A Voice From Nowhere" continues Gnod's mid-album dalliance with naked experimentalism, unfolding as a crunching and industrial-sounding percussion showcase nicely embellished by a complex miasma of crackling noise, echoing samples, buried feedback, and droning synths. If it had been allowed to steadily build and expand further, it probably could have been the album's centerpiece, but Gnod inexplicably decided to keep things relatively concise with that one, killing off their gnarled and clanking juggernaut after a mere six minutes. The following "A Body" is the final salvo into *Chapel Perilous's*

abstract and experimental mid-section, marrying an echo-heavy spoken-word monologue to distantly thundering percussion and distorted guitar loops. That extended abstract interlude is violently shattered with the closing "Uncle Frank Says Turn It Down," however, as Gnod erupt into a churning catharsis of pummeling riffage. I like it a lot better than "Donovan's Daughters," but it is still something of a puzzling piece, as it sounds like the explosive climax of a song with all of the surrounding song excised. Somehow it works though, as it has a very cool dynamic arc that frequently sounds like it is stuck in a bulldozing locked-groove. It would certainly be better if it were attached to some kind of meaningful build-up, but it is still a hell of a wonderfully visceral show of force.

I was bit surprised to belatedly read that "Donovan's Daughters" and "Uncle Frank" were "two tumultuous tracks that [Gnod] had been honing and hammering into shape on the road," as *Chapel Perilous*

does not at all sound like an album that has been chiseled to perfection and road-tested. Instead, it feels like a rather rushed and scattered release from a band that had plenty of good ideas, but not enough time to shape them into a coherent album. While that is admittedly disappointing after

Just Say No

, that album was the aberration and

Chapel Perilous

is kind of a return to equilibrium: Gnod is definitely not a linearly evolving band that is particularly concerned about releasing only their best material. Rather, they are like an uncontrollable chain reaction that is prolifically documented—each new release is a snapshot of

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where their restless creative drive has taken them at that particular moment. Sometimes, that snapshot captures a moment of sustained brilliance and sometimes it comes at a more transitional period.

Chapel Perilous

falls more into the latter category, as it features a lot of great moments, yet they rarely cohere perfectly into great songs. That said, however, there is only one significant misstep on

Chapel

, even if it is the album's longest piece. Without "Donovan's Daughters," this album would make quite a strong EP, as everything else is quite good (particularly "Europa").

Samples:

- [Donovan's Daughters](#)
- [Europa](#)
- [Uncle Frank Says Turn It Down](#)