

Brainwashed - Vic Chesnutt, "At the Cut"

Written by Lucas Schleicher

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Spilling over with trembling strings and thunderous crescendos, "Coward" foreshadows the electric energy that is to be found throughout Vic Chesnutt's newest record. With members of Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Silver Mt. Zion, and Fugazi once again contributing, *At the Cut* is populated by giant melodies, quiet meditations, and intense studies on mortality and memory. But, for all its bombast,

At the Cut

is probably most notable for Chesnutt's unwavering honesty and cathartic power. Because of these qualities

it

has quickly become one of my favorite and most played records this year.

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Reviews and press releases of *At the Cut* like to concentrate on the various references Chesnutt makes throughout the record. There are, admittedly, a lot of them and on the cover of the album Vic himself appears resigned among numerous paintings, as though he were an exhibit at a museum. Some writers have been quick to point out that he references no less than W.H. Auden, Frank Norris, Philip Guston, Victor Hugo, Franz Kafka, and William Shakespeare, and that's in just one or two songs. Impressive as that may be, Vic's literary and artistic interests aren't what make his record great. In fact, with the exception of Auden, his songwriting and lyrics are unlike anything produced by any one of those artists. If the album cover suggests anything about the music at all, it's that Chesnutt's personal life is the subject of this record, not the influences that might've helped foster it.

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The places where *At the Cut* is most unadorned are the places where it is most powerful and affecting. Whether blithely describing his history with death ("Flirted With You All My Life") or an encounter with his grandmother in the kitchen ("Granny"), Chesnutt impresses the most when he lets mundane images and ideas into his music. Those are the images that have stuck with me the most and they remind me how talented someone must be to sing about them without sounding either trite or banal. The final lines of the album could've been delivered in so many shrill and unappealing ways, but when Vic sings, "She said / 'You are the light of my life / and the beat of my heart,'" there isn't a doubt in my mind that he feels those words as deeply as anyone can. And he wants his listeners to feel them, too, without cringing or second-guessing the motives.

But, Chesnutt writes in myriad ways, so for every mention of dentures and friendship there are at least one or two psycho-analytic lines of poetry and an equal number of vague symbols or potentially mystifying scenes. In response, Vic's band dances their way through various styles of music, matching his twists and turns with jazz-like funeral dirges, the kind of rock 'n' roll expected from Bob Dylan in the mid '60s, and orchestrated blues. On first listen, Chesnutt's electric songs are the real show-stealers. Both "Chinaberry Tree" and "Philip Guston," along with the opening "Coward," put the electric guitar in the spotlight. In "Chinaberry Tree" the guitar rips across Chesnutt's vocals like a lightning strike, and in "Philip Guston" it chugs and totters like it belongs in an *Einstürzende Neubauten* song. But, the more quietly intense songs like "Chain" and "We Hovered with Short Wings" have their own gravity, which is concocted with a combination of atmosphere and patient development. Although not as immediate, repeat listens reveal them to be of equal potency. Vic and company weave their way through these approaches with an even hand, favoring neither, but obviously seeking to inject every one of them with intensity and cathartic energy.

That cathartic energy plays a role equal with to Chesnutt's narrative and lyrical honesty. I cannot listen to *At the Cut* and passively digest it; the record forces us to feel the record along with Vic, so that when he sings about his mother dying or about desperation and rejecting empty ritual, associated memories, emotions, and ideas simultaneously emerge without anyone having to mention them. There are a few musicians that aim for and achieve this effect. It is among the greatest and highest accomplishments any songwriter and lyricist can achieve in popular music. Vic Chesnutt reaches such heights on *At the Cut* and he does it almost effortlessly, as if that was what he was born to do. This is easily one of Vic Chesnutt's best records, and a standout album in a year filled with superb music.

samples:

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- [Coward](#)
- [Chain](#)
- [Philip Guston](#)