

Brainwashed - Christopher Bissonnette, "Essays in Idleness"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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This album is a bit of an experiment in simplicity for Bissonnette, as he decided to limit himself solely to sounds generated from a synthesizer that he built himself. While I was initially dismayed to see that such a reliably excellent composer had tossed in his lot with the recent glut of synth-worshippers, I am pleased to report that Christopher has not completely lost his mind and that he is still making music that is distinctively his own. As a complete album, *Essays* does not quite stand with Bissonnette's lush and more varied previous work, but some of the individual pieces are certainly quite good and I always like it when an artist takes an unexpected gamble.

[Kranky](#)

As Kranky are quick to mention in their description of *Essays in Idleness*, Bissonnette wields his synthesizer a bit differently than most of his contemporaries, choosing to focus primarily on slowly transforming sustained tones. In that regard, this album makes perfect sense, as Christopher is no stranger at all to droning, drifting ambiance and the right synthesizer can offer some rather amazing possibilities for the real-time textural manipulation of such sounds. While Bissonnette does not rely particularly heavily on that feature, he certainly manages to score impressively with the opening "Greenish in its Light," an absolutely beautiful *mélange* of warm drones, randomized buzzes, and melancholy bleeps.

Unfortunately, Christopher then haplessly blunders into one of my personal peeves with "A Deplorable Corruption," opting for some dated retro-futurist textures that scream "'70s science program soundtrack." That just about derails the album entirely for me, as he seems quite fond of those glistening artificial sounds, repeating them yet again on the following "Entanglements." Thankfully, "Delusions" restores some of the lost momentum, gradually evolving from gently buzzing ambiance into something much more complex, quavering, and emotionally resonant.

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From then on out, *Essays* is almost unwaveringly solid, though none of the remaining four songs quite manage to topple "Greenish" as the album's reigning highlight. "Missing Chapters," for example, evokes an otherworldly tableaux of bittersweet loneliness and distant memories, while "Uniformity is Undesirable" dabbles uncomfortably close to those accursed science film textures, but keeps them pleasantly ominous with some well-placed swoops and snarls. Similarly dated textures dog the weaker "Another Moving Sight," but it at least boasts an appealing throb and builds to a likable (if a bit understated) crescendo.

Essays

then concludes in fine fashion with the sublimely twinkling and blissed-out coda of "Wasting a Little Time."

All of that adds up to a perfectly likable album, but *Essays* is definitely a relatively minor and divergent addition to Bissonnette's discography. If I were not so predisposed to like Christopher due to his previous work, I probably would not have allowed myself much of a chance to get drawn in beyond "Greenish in its Light." However, once I started actively looking for reasons to like

Idleness, I certainly found them.

While I think that anyone new to Bissonnette should probably bypass this one, as its very limited palette sacrifices quite a bit of depth and humanity, longtime fans will likely find this to be a pleasant enough detour (and will need to at least hear "Greenish"). Or they will be absolutely heartbroken that Christopher's first solo album in seven years is so different from what they were expecting. It is hard to say. God, I wish Bissonnette was more prolific. Damn.

Samples:

- [Greenish in its Light](#)
- [Delusions](#)
- [Uniformity is Undesireable](#)