

Brainwashed - Drøne, "Mappa Mundi"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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After two fine vinyl releases on Pomperipossa, Mark van Hoen and Mike Harding's mesmerizing sound collage project now takes a detour to Touch's Field Music imprint. While the transition to CD format does not seem to have made much of a structural impact (the album still feels like a single, abstract, and longform piece), *Mappa Mundi* is nonetheless a radically different album from last year's more musical *A Perfect*

Blind. The abandonment of the more composed, melodic, and "structured" elements of their sound may seem like a deeply counterintuitive move after such a wonderful leap forward, yet Drøne prove themselves to be remarkably fluid and adept at changing their aesthetic to fit their conceptual inspirations. In this case, the stated objective is "tracing and describing the audio surrounding and occupying the planet Earth," which mostly translates into a hauntingly strange and mysterious immersion into a crackling entropy of phantom radio transmissions, squalls of static, choruses of insects, and creepily digitized voices.

[Field Music](#)

Mappa Mundi is ostensibly divided into five discrete sections, but trying to figure out where one ends and another begins feels like a very meaningless and unnecessary endeavor. I can say with completely certainty that the first section is sardonically titled "Voice of the People" though and that any sounds directly emanating from actual humans are conspicuously absent. Instead, the piece unfolds as a throbbing metallic rhythm of clanging machinery, cavernous echoes, and an ominous bass thrum. It sounds a lot like a field recording from an especially reverberant factory with all of the non-machine sounds excised. Gradually, however, it gives way to a garbled spew of jabbering electronics, like a duet between a dial-up modem and a disoriented robot. That curious scene is then disrupted by the sound of a jet taking off coupled with an erratic high-hat rhythm that bleeds into the sounds of a train. It would be exhausting to recount all of the similarly surreal segues that follow, but rest assured that there are many more and that

Mappa Mundi kind of feels like someone artfully swirled several Chris Watson albums together into a disorienting mindfuck. Occasionally there are some ghostly sounds that seem like they may have originated from a synth, but they still feel like ambient sounds that Harding and van Hoen plucked from the ether rather than played.

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To their credit, however, the duo are not content to simply cull evocative sounds from the world around them nor are they willing to linger on a single passage just because it sounds good: *Mappa Mundi*

is a restlessly kinetic and endlessly evolving collage from start to finish. In fact, this aesthetic feels like a greater and more transcendent artistic achievement than previous

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albums in many ways: while not "composed" in the traditional sense,

Mappa Mundi

weaves an extremely complex, shifting, and very deliberate unreality with its recontextualized snatches of audio detritus. More hyperbolically put: Harding and van Hoen have moved beyond creating music and into creating worlds...or at least artfully conveying their perceptions of an existing one. I am not projecting any God-like genius onto

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, mind you, but the current shift in scope is definitely a trickier and more ambitious endeavor.

Once the initial industrial theme fully subsides, *Mappa Mundi's* primary canvas gradually becomes Harding's shortwave radio recordings, transforming the album into a fitful crackling fog that mysterious shapes continually emerge from. In a bizarre way, this album creates the illusion that I have suddenly become clairaudient and hyper-sensitive, yet have not quite worked out how to harness those powers or choose what I focus on. Instead, I am just able to hear the cacophony of hidden signals and transmissions that are all around me every day and it is exactly that (a low-level cacophony) for the most part. Sometimes, however, there is a clearer signal and I can pick out an enigmatic tangle of overlapping voices. Other times, the background noise subsides enough to allow the usual ambient sounds of the world to peak through, and I get a glimpse of a church choir, children scampering around a playground, distorted announcements echoing though interior of a train station, or some excited dogs barking on their suburban lawns. At times, the juxtapositions are weirdly beautiful or cryptically haunting, but the real achievement is the unpredictably shifting and immersive world that van Hoen and Harding conjure from all their layers of static, hiss, garbled voices, and scrambled electronics. It may not culminate in any kind of mindblowing climax or epiphany, but the elaborate aural hallucination of previously hidden frequencies roiling throughout my previously structured sonic reality is quite a satisfying one.

As much as I find this album beguiling, I am hesitant to declare it the crown jewel of Drøne's small discography, as the more melodic and accessible

A Perfect Blind

is a hard act to top. Perhaps that is why

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took such a divergent direction, evolving in a lateral way rather than building upon the success of the previous template. If this album has a flaw, it is merely that it is a bit more challenging and abstract than its predecessor, creeping much closer to field recording territory than the strains of experimental music that are more in vogue at the moment. This is definitely more "serious sound art" than "underground music," feeling like an intriguing new phase of the musique concrète tradition rather than an offshoot of a hip contemporary scene that happens to be somewhat influenced by the GRM milieu. Also, some listeners may find it a bit too understated and drifting when compared to the duo's more conventionally dynamic previous work. I am not one of those listeners though, as I tend to find grand gestures and clear set pieces somewhat distracting and disruptive. For what it is,

Mappa Mundi

is pitch-perfect. As such, I am more than happy to give myself over to its unhurried and phantasmagoric flow. To my ears, this is one of the great secret treasures of the year.

Samples:

- [Excerpt One](#)
- [Excerpt Two](#)
- [Excerpt Three](#)