

Brainwashed - UUUU

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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This is the debut album from an ambitious project that brings together half of Wire (Matthew Simms and Graham Lewis), idiosyncratic synth supernova Thighpaulsandra, and percussion virtuoso Valentina Magaletti. Naturally, any project where Thighpaulsandra is untethered by someone else's clearly defined aesthetic is destined to be a bit of a stylistic rollercoaster (even more so when Graham Lewis's own eccentricity is factored in), so *UUUU* is quite a freewheeling and disorienting affair at times, dabbling equally in prog, psych-rock freak-out, drone, krautrock homage, experimentation, and Lewis-style "pop" weirdness. It should also come as no surprise that UUUU's work feels quite spontaneous and improvisatory and occasionally errs into bombast and indulgence. Such moments are largely eclipsed by the times when everything gloriously locks into place, however, as this foursome almost always find a way to wrest some vistas of sublime beauty or flashes of transcendent inspiration from their wild and lysergic free-rock excursions.

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Projects such as UUUU are always an unpredictable gamble, as there is generally zero chance that they will ever sound like the sum of their parts: anyone expecting a perfect blend of Coil and Wire combined with a killer drummer is destined for a well-deserved disappointment. Whenever a "supergroup" like this surfaces, it is probably safe to say that they never got to spend nearly as much time together as they had hoped and that no one spent months saving up their best song ideas for the project—everyone is busy and working on other things. The trade-off, however, is getting to hear what some formidable creative minds can pull together when unfettered by the demands of their main gig and what kind of chemistry emerges when several artists with strong visions collide. Unavoidably, the fruits of such unions tend to take the shape of nakedly improvised-sounding jams, a fate that the first few songs here embrace wholeheartedly. They are certainly interesting and unusual ones though, as "The Latent Black Path of Summons Served" combines brooding, nocturnal synth ambiance with clattering and metallic-sounding ritualistic percussion...until the kitschy fretless bass and strangled violins kick in. That bizarre Fourth World avant-jungle funk vibe is short-lived, sadly, as "Black Path" soon erupts into a firestorm of rumbling toms, stuttering electronics, and deranged found sounds. In its last moments, however, it unexpectedly coheres into something that sounds like a deeply hallucinatory vintage horror soundtrack. "Partial Response Takes Another Form" is very much a kindred spirit, initially taking shape as kind of a *Time Machines*-style drone piece awash in

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simmering feedback; strange insectoid and liquid textures; and ominous monstrous groans before transforming into something that sounds like an understated jazz vamp happening in a volcano filled with dinosaurs. It is a truly bizarre aesthetic, probably best described as "Lustmord, Sonic Youth, and Jon Hassell team up to improvise a soundtrack to a deeply psychedelic (and psychotic) adaptation of

The Isle of Dr. Moreau

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With the epic third piece, however, Thighpaulsandra's long tenure in Spiritualized starts to bleed into the proceedings, and the foursome blast into something that sounds like the huge final crescendo of a prog-tinged feast of arena rock excess. That move certainly caught me off-guard, but it turns out to only be the opening salvo of a deeply strange, oft abstract, and unrepentantly kaleidoscopic 16-minute journey. Something amazing happens around the halfway point though, as Magaletti locks into a simmering groove of shuffling snare and clattering metal and Thighpaulsandra unveils a gorgeously dreamlike and swaying synth motif. Rather than just being a fluke moment of lucidity, it ends up becoming the foundation for a sublime and eerily beautiful space-rock interlude that any psych band would kill for. More importantly, a completely different album starts to emerge once I have passed through the grandiose pomp of the "Five Gates" (which naturally builds to one more explosive arena rock crescendo before finally winding down). The first and biggest surprise is that "Boots With Wings" is an actual structured song, albeit quite a harsh and deranged one, resembling one of Graham Lewis's more outré "pop" solo excursions bolstered with a heavy bass line, visceral industrial percussion, and wild squalls of electronics and mangled jazz motifs. Later, "Verlagerung, Verlagerung, Verlagerung" is initially even more structured and song-like, but the vocals turn out to be a mere prelude to an extended faux krautrock jam of motorik grooves and radiant, burbling synth noodling.

The remaining pieces are not quite as immediately striking, but the entire second half of the album is cumulatively a very strange trip down a rabbit hole indeed. For example, "It's Going All Over The Floor" gradually transforms from some kind of mutant Fourth World reggae into a coda of abstract machine noise, while "The Princess Anne Love Cassette" begins as a half-ominous/half-tender bit of ghostly understated drone...then erupts into an impossibly dense and muscular strain of '80s-style art-funk (think "Ministry doing a pummeling Japan cover"). The final "Il Ventre Del Nulla" is yet another surreal curveball, unleashing a howling storm of guitar noise over a throbbing bed of dense and seething synths that resembles a cathartic noise-rock freak-out over a cult '80s horror movie sound track. In a perverse way, that finale is oddly perfect, simultaneously embodying and explaining the UUUU aesthetic: this foursome is like a giant grotesque monster that devours esoteric strains of underground music, then spews them back out in radically altered form. I certainly have no problem with that, but I do wish UUUU had more of a tendency to let their better ideas stick around longer or perhaps even form their own self-contained songs. I suspect that no one involved is particularly interested in that though, as UUUU seem to be entirely about the joy of discovery and the alchemy of order

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unexpectedly blossoming from chaos. That aesthetic certainly has its own appeal, but it makes for a challenging, messy, and sometimes exasperating listening experience. It is also quite a unique one though, so listeners amenable to an eccentric and voluminous outpouring of unfiltered experimentation and exploration will likely find UUUU's bizarre trajectory to be quite an absorbing one.

Samples:

- [The Latent Black Path of Summons Served](#)
- [Five Gates](#)
- [Verlagerung, Verlagerung, Verlagerung](#)