

## Brainwashed - Umberto, "Helpless Spectator"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Much like Brian Pyle's Ensemble Economique project, Matt Hill's Umberto guise often falls into a stylistic territory that I have a hard time connecting with. In Umberto's case, that territory is a sort of "retro soundtrack" vision informed by both '80s horror films and spaced-out '70s synth music. Both artists are equally capable of flooring me though and this latest release happily falls into the latter category at several points, as Hill took a more song-based and live instrumentation-driven approach this time around. Admittedly, the resultant stylistic transformation was exactly not an extreme one (or a consistent one), but it is sometimes just enough to push *Helpless Spectator* out of the Goblin/John Carpenter realm and into something closer to a killer space rock band wielding unconventional instrumentation. That is an extremely cool niche when it works, yet this album shines most brilliantly on the shadowy, synth-driven psychedelia of "Leafless Tree," which is an absolute goddamn masterpiece.

### [Thrill Jockey](#)

It is hard to decide whether or not *Helpless Spectator* is a full-on concept album in its intent, but Hill borrowed the title from Julian Jaynes' controversial book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, which made a deep impact on him. Jaynes' book posits that the human mind used to be divided into two distinct halves: one which spoke and one which obeyed, but Hill was primarily fascinated by the idea that our consciousness might wrongly perceive itself as being in control when it actually is not. Obviously, such metaphysical concerns are fertile soil for a heady, deep-psych reverie and Hill and his consciousness fitfully do quite a fine job conjuring and sustaining that shadow world. Notably, he had some talented outside help for this album as well, almost making Umberto more like a band than a solo project (but not quite). His choice of collaborators was an intriguing and curious one, as he primarily worked with cellist/composer Aaron Martin (who also contributes bowed banjo). The duo are occasionally joined by Million Brazilians' "Idaho Joe" Winslow as well, who contributes pedal steel to a pair of songs. Given that Hill is very much a synth-focused fellow, that line-up results in a conspicuous absence of conventional rock instruments (though it should be noted that Hill is a damn good bassist when he wants to be). At times, that unusual palette can feel like a constraint, but Hill and Martin are quite an inventive duo that generally makes it work.

Despite the shift in both line-up and intent, however, there are still a number of pieces that

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sound like they could have been composed for film soundtracks. The enigmatic and brooding opener "Hidden Thoughts" is one such piece, but Hill made a conscious effort to move towards "warm, softer pads" with this release: the aesthetic is more ambiguous and meditative than sinister. If it was an actual soundtrack, *Helpless Spectator* would definitely fit an eerily atmospheric art film rather than giallo fare. The best piece in that more cinematic vein is the bittersweetly lovely closer "Arroyo," which marries warm strings with minimalist piano patterns and a languorously beautiful sliding guitar motif. "Sadness, Happiness, Disgust, and Surprise" is also a noteworthy piece though, as it expectedly transforms from a dramatically melancholy neo-classical piece into a wild final act that sounds like a nightmarish prog jam. I suppose that is the "surprise" part and it was quite a delightful one, even if most of the piece felt a bit too melodramatic for my taste. Hill and Martin achieve a far more satisfying sort of exquisite melancholy later with the tender piano ballad "Absent Images," as the cello moans and swoons in all the right ways and a burbling synth motif adds a subtly hallucinatory veil that makes it all feel wonderfully dreamlike. The more striking pieces on the album tend to be the rhythm-driven ones though, particularly the swirling blow-out "Spontaneous Possession," which beautifully combines a thumping kick drum pulse with snaking flute melodies, a propulsive bass line, and roiling guitar chaos. The whimsically crunching and carnivalesque "Reflection" stands out as well, even if it does not evolve much beyond its beginnings.

The crown jewel of the album, however, is "Leafless Tree." At its core, it is a hauntingly subdued synth piece centered on a woozily spectral arpeggio theme. As it progresses, however, it becomes a slow-burning gem of simmering tension and tragic beauty, gradually fleshing out with moody smears of pedal steel and ringing synth tones. It is quite honestly one of the most achingly gorgeous synth pieces I have ever heard, which highlights a key trait of Matt Hill's work: he has the vision, instrumental prowess, and lightness of touch necessary to make some absolutely stunning and sublime music, but his erratic muse steers him in some curious and eclectic directions that are not always for me. As such, *Helpless Spectator* is a very strange mixed bag of an album, pulled in several different directions with varying degrees of success. Moreover, Hill's finest ideas are not always the ones that stick around the longest, which can be kind of exasperating. In particular, the outro of "Sadness, Happiness, Disgust, and Surprise" makes me hope that a director commissions Hill for such a lucrative film score that he is able to take a year off to assemble a killer band and focus entirely upon recording a scarily intense prog album (I plan to irrationally cling to that fantasy indefinitely). For now, however,

*Helpless Spectator*

is a masterfully polished and skillfully arranged hit-or-miss release that is legitimately dazzling on the occasions when it hits.

Samples can be found [here](#) .