

Brainwashed - Kassel Jaeger & Jim O'Rourke, "In Cobalt Aura Sleeps"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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As both an experimentalist and a songwriter, Jim O'Rourke has been responsible for a number of beloved and highly influential albums over the course of his storied career, but he is a bit of a prolific wild card as well: it is damn near impossible to guess which albums will capture him in an especially inspired mood and which will not. That said, his previous collaboration with Kassel Jaeger (2017's *Wakes on Cerulean*) had some very promising passages that transcended typical drone/sound art fare, so I was quite curious to see if this follow-up would flesh out their shared vision into something truly great. As it turns out,

In Cobalt Aura Sleeps

is a hell of a lot like its predecessor: fitfully wonderful, but not without some lulls. Nevertheless, it does feel like a significant evolution, as it is both darker and more tightly focused than *Cerulean*

, erring more on the side of "understated" and "curiously constructed" rather than "too improvisatory." Fortunately, those hurdles can be mostly overcome with the aid of some headphones and suitable volume, revealing a satisfyingly strong album that is richly textured, absorbing, and mysterious.

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This album borrows its title from a Mikhail Lermontov poem ("Alone I Set Out on The Road") in which the author wrestles with a deep sense of hopelessness despite the pleasures of the misty landscape and a lovely canopy of stars overhead. To some extent, the album evokes a similar sense of quiet solitude and desolate nocturnal beauty, as well as its concurrent existential dread. Later in the poem, however, Lermontov expresses the wish to abandon consciousness for a blissful sleep among gently rustling leaves and the soothing sounds of "voices sweet," which is definitely where the poet and this album part ways (though *In Cobalt Aura Sleeps* does have a slow-motion feel of dreamlike unreality). While I would not say that the album quite crosses the line into nightmare territory, it would be a stretch to describe either half of this two-part piece as anything resembling an untroubled idyll. There

are

some natural night sounds drifting throughout the album though, creating an unusual balance of textures that calls to mind the haunted ruins of factory bordered by a pond populated by all manner of frogs and crickets. In the piece's first half, for example, a skeletal drum machine-like rhythm of pops and clicks emerges from an insectoid hum to settle into a quietly simmering and

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off-kilter groove. For a while, Jaeger and O'Rourke skillfully embellish that backdrop with ghostly feedback whines, assorted noises, and swells of distorted guitar, achieving an impressive degree of fragile, phantasmagoric beauty. Sadly, that spell was not destined to last, as all sense of structure gets sucked into a black hole of deep space abstraction around the halfway point. That said, the "stoned kosmische synth" interlude that follows is occasionally compelling, resembling a deconstructed and borderline malevolent remix of something off *I'm Happy and I'm Singing*.

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The album's second half fades in with something that sounds like a field recording of a ghost train before resolving into a passage of heavy synth drones mingled with sputtering noise squalls and washes of enigmatic field recordings. It is considerably more menacing than the album's first half, as it has a very sickly, corroded feel as well as a prominent motif that resembles a slowed-down air raid siren. Gradually, however, the mood becomes increasingly shifting and ambiguous, blossoming into a stretch that feels like a rapturously gorgeous piece of music has been smeared into out-of-tune harmonies. Then, around the halfway point, the piece transforms into something resembling a psychedelic chorus of chirping space frogs accompanied by a sinister-sounding shimmer of dissonant synth tones. After that, the piece builds to a strange and otherworldly crescendo that seems like a mindbending collage of machine noise, beeping computers, a burbling stream, still more frogs, and some alternately brooding and blurring space rock synths. There might also be some unrecognizably warped and stretched classical music in the mix too, but the most compelling aspect of that culminating pile-up of disparate sounds is how the entire mass has the unsettling feel of a living mass that is erratically pulsing and fading in and out of focus.

My only minor grievance with *Cobalt* is the same one that I have with just about every collaboration between prominent experimental musicians: it seems like it was edited together from improvisations and its flashes of genuine inspiration are bridged together by passages of comparative indulgence and directionlessness. That said, the best moments on this album are damn near revelatory, so I cannot lament the meandering path that it took to get those places. The crucial thing is only that they got there at all. That said, the duo were unusually successful in shaping a solid and coherent album from their seemingly disparate vignettes. And, more importantly, there are at least two novel aesthetic niches pioneered on

Cobalt

that I would have loved to hear expanded into their own full-length albums. While I sincerely doubt O'Rourke and Jaeger will ever revisit those territories themselves, it was nevertheless a delight to get a glimpse of otherworldly vistas that would absolutely not otherwise exist without this album. Perhaps some other artists will someday pick up the baton and attempt to grant me my wish, but they will have an extremely tough act to follow if they do, as O'Rourke and Jaeger share quite a unique sensibility that merges masterful lightness of touch with bold experimentation. Obviously, both artists have produced plenty of wonderful and compelling work on their own, but in the realm of pure creativity, this formidable union sometimes feels even greater than the sum of its parts.

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Samples can be found [here](#) .