

## Brainwashed - TALsounds, "Acquiesce"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 31 May 2020 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 01 June 2020 06:45

---



It has been three years since Natalie Chami's last solo album (2017's dreamlike and seductive *Love Sick*

) and quite a lot has changed in her life since then. Given that this project is essentially a very intimate and abstractly diaristic one, that passing of time has unsurprisingly led to significant (if subtle) transformations in the tone of Chami's vision. Thankfully, her genius for soulful, sensuous, and blarily hallucinatory pop-like improvisations remains wonderfully intact, but *Acquiesce*

feels more like a series of languorous, meditative reveries than it does an emotionally smoldering R&B-inspired break-up album. Admittedly, the collision of that latter aesthetic with Chami's artier, more experimental side was a large part of what made *Love Sick*

such a great and unique album, but her emotional directness, natural fluidity, and strong melodic intuition are every bit as evident and effective as they were 2017. While *Acquiesce*

does not quite rise to the same level as its predecessor as a whole, its handful of highlights are easily as gorgeous as any of Chami's previous work.

### [NNA Tapes](#)

It is largely a myth that suffering inspires great art, as being miserable can often be creatively paralyzing rather than a trigger for a cathartic breakthrough. And sometimes it leads to neither, though it is worth noting that striving to create great art in the first place invites its own torments.

That said, every artist has their own individual way of processing their emotions and those intense feelings can certainly lead to a powerful vision if they are successfully harnessed. Based on *Love Sick*, Chami is unquestionably an artist who excels at transforming deep emotions into great art, as the project's spontaneous/improvisatory nature makes it a direct (if impressionistic) reflection of her inner state at any given point. Chami is, of course, well aware of that relationship, noting that after *Love Sick*, she "recorded less music in a single year than she ever had before" and "later realized it was because she was happy." That does not mean that she was not playing and performing regularly, as Chami is always involved in various Chicago-area collaborative endeavors, but her far more personal solo work was simply awaiting a fresh spark to ignite the next therapeutic creative outpouring. As it happens, inspiration eventually came in the form of mounting anxieties about the nature of

## Brainwashed - TALsounds, "Acquiesce"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 31 May 2020 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 01 June 2020 06:45

---

happiness, falling in love, and her future. Trying to process a host of nagging worries and uncertainties is certainly never pleasant, but I greatly admire Chami's artistic honesty: I am sure she could have easily thrown together an album of wordless vocalizations over an accumulated backlog of cool synth motifs and no one would have been the wiser. Instead, she waited until her tumultuous thoughts gradually took shape into something intimate and meaningful.

Aside from the significantly diminished R&B influence, *Acquiesce* features the same minimal, uncluttered palette that I have grown to expect from Chami's work: tender, slow-moving synth themes and floating, hazy vocals composed of poetic phrase fragments. With TALsounds, mood, emotion, and flow have always been far more important than the actual words that Chami sings, as she "treats her voice like an instrument that breathes calm into interwoven electronic parts, often leaning into vowels instead of phrases." In fact, Chami often does not fully realize what she is singing until she transcribes her lyrics post-performance, which probably provides a very interesting window into her subconscious. Occasionally, however, Chami will fixate on a specific phrase and elevate it into something akin to a mantra, as she does with "there's so much more" on the album's gorgeously swirling and swooning centerpiece "Else." For the most part, however, Chami's vocals blur so seamlessly into her synth themes that I do not even notice when they are absent, as they are on the tender and bittersweetly beautiful "Conveyor." Obviously some feelings are ineffable, but given the "live" nature of these pieces, Chami is also limited in how many things she can do at once: if she is immersed in a particularly layered and melodic synth motif, spontaneously conjuring up words and a separate vocal melody is not exactly feasible (and would probably be superfluous anyway). That said, most of the album's highlights still tend to feature vocals of some kind, even if they are not quite the focal point or hook. For example, the closing "No Restoring" is an absolutely sublime reverie of warm, quavering drones and lazily blooming melodies long long before it is enhanced by a dreamy haze of cooing vocals layers. The same is true of the gently burbling and spacey psychedelia of the organ-like "No Rise."

The beauty of Chami's aesthetic is not without its minor frustrations though, as I am certainly curious about what she could achieve if she set out to write and record a non-improvised batch of songs (or at least devoted some more attention to beats and grooves). Given how central spontaneity is to her vision, however, I suspect wishing for a meticulously crafted suite of fully formed synthpop gems is as doomed and irrational as wishing that she would figure-skate or raise llamas instead of devoting herself to music: this is what she does and she does it beautifully. I dearly wish I could train my mind to stop heading in that "what if?" direction whenever experimental music brushes tantalizingly close to melodic songcraft, as the world is full of catchy songs and there is only one project like TALsounds. Consequently, both it and its rawness and imperfection should be cherished. *Acquiesce* could not possibly have been anything other than what it is, as Chami is an artist fully devoted to directness, honesty, and immediacy. Anything less would likely break the precarious spell necessary for glimpses of sublime, soulful heaven like "Conveyor" and "Else." As long as Chami keeps having flashes of inspiration like those, she should have absolutely no misgivings at all about sticking with her current process. It is damn nice to have TALsounds back.

## Brainwashed - TALsounds, "Acquiesce"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 31 May 2020 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 01 June 2020 06:45

---

Samples can be found [here](#) .