

Brainwashed - Coil, "The New Backwards"

Written by Jonathan Dean

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As part of Important Records' quadruple-vinyl issue of Coil's swansong *The Ape of Naples*, an album of new material has been included, finally making good on the long-scheduled-but-interminably-delayed

Backwards

album. For

The New Backwards

, Sleazy and Danny Hyde have returned to the storied Nothing Records session tapes and created a suite of six songs that engage in an oddly ambivalent conversation between Coil's distant past and its posthumous present.

[Important](#)

Coil first announced their intention to record an album for Nothing Records back in the mid-1990s, using the working title of *Backwards* which soon became *International Dark Skies*, later changed to

God Please Fuck My Mind For Good

and then

The World Ended A Long Time Ago

. Had it been released shortly after being announced, the album would have been the proper follow-up to

Love's Secret Domain

. Although Coil apparently recorded some material at Trent Reznor's studio in New Orleans around this time, nothing surfaced for years other than a low-quality bootleg cassette of tentative instrumental sketches recorded for Torso in the early 1990s, which have since become an essential part of Coil's discography, despite their unofficial nature. Over the years, the NIN/Coil connection bore fruit in the form of some uncredited production and remix work, but eventually the relationship seemed to fizzle out. Even though Reznor clearly maintained his Coil fanboy status throughout the '90s and '00s, Coil were uninterested in dealing with Universal and Interscope lawyers, and never delivered the album. Coil's

Songs of the Week

offered some tantalizing glimpses of what might have been, and tracks such as "A Cold Cell" and "AYOR" popped up on various compilation albums, always with the understanding that these tracks were originally destined for inclusion on

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As Coil moved in ever more esoteric directions, with copious side projects and pseudonyms, eventually creating the late-period sound that characterized the *Musick to Play in the Dark* diptych—spectral, haunted atmospheres and cryptic, semi-improvised, open-ended songs—the hope that they would return to the

Backwards

sessions became more and more remote. Coil rarely looked backwards, and seemed bent on pursuing their future evolution, rather than forensically exhuming their past. The obsessive persistence of fans on message boards and e-mail lists fetishized Coil's never-finished album to point that it had become the post-industrial answer to

SMiLE

. Coil's sole concession in their final days was a live version of the (supposed) title track "Backwards" performed at live shows in 2002, which merely seemed to rekindle the possibility that the album would eventually see the light of release. Following John Balance's untimely passing, the release of

The Ape of Naples

seemed to at least partially address these hopes, containing a version of "Cold Cell," "AYOR" and a track called "Heaven's Blade" (which, it must be said, bears little resemblance to the

Backwards

demo version, which sounds like Sun Ra trying to cover "20 Jazz Funk Greats").

Still,

Ape

was not quite what everyone had been waiting for.

Now, finally, there is something tangible that promises to make good on all of the empty promises made for the last 15 years. However, much like Brian Wilson's 2004 version of *SMiLE*, *The New Backwards*

is not really

Backwards

, and those expecting to hear the missing-link connecting

LSD

-era Coil to its later incarnation will be bitterly disappointed. Those desiring cleaned-up versions of the multiply-dubbed

Backwards

bootlegs will also be disappointed. What we get here cannot even properly be called a new Coil album. Instead of a necrophilic return to past iterations, or a wholly new and progressive interpretation of older material, what we get on

The New Backwards

is a fascinating and complex dialogue between Coil as it was in the mid-1990s, and Coil as it

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stands now as a posthumous project involving ex-members Sleazy and Danny Hyde. It's a fascinating and rewarding album, and without hesitation I can say that it is the best post-Coil release yet, easily bettering the majority of *The Ape of Naples* and the subsequent projects of Coil alumni.

Aside from "Princess Margaret's Man in the D'Jamalfina," which is a reworking of the bootleg track often labeled "Egyptian Basses," none of this material seems to bear any sort of *direct* relationship to the *Backwards* demo tracks. We can only presume that at least half of these songs were conceived by the original line-up, as three of them contain full vocal contributions by Balance himself, but beyond that we have no real clue as to the origin of many of these tracks. Other than the barest hint of the demo track "Elves" (and also comp track "The Test"), the opener, "Careful What You Wish For," seems like an entirely new creation. It is trademark Coil through-and-through, shuddering beats band and discrete blocks of noise coalescing into a cyclical rhythmic framework, decorated by haunted bits of stray voltage and barely-reigned-in electricity. The sole vocal is a heavily-filtered chant of the familiar slogan: "God please fuck my mind for good!" This could be Balance, but it really could be anyone, including a cleverly programmed voice synthesizer. Captain Beefheart's tossed-off line of profane lyricism is turned into a brutal mantra, a hedonistic call for a radical submission to powerful forces that takes on a tragically appropriate irony following Balance's death. Of course, it's tempting to read the title of the track as Sleazy's sad retort to Balance's self-destructive incantation.

"Nature Is A Language" steals a particularly cheesy couplet from The Smiths' "Ask" ("Nature is a language/Can't you read?") Balance locating new levels of paganistic profundity in Morrissey's presumably sarcastic lyric, delivering one of his more possessed vocal takes. (In JB's defense, he apparently encountered these lyrics scrawled on a bathroom wall, out of context.) Sleazy and Hyde take pleasure in deconstructing Balance's vocals and putting them through an exhausting obstacle course of lysergic mutations. The song's shuffling rhythms and organic multitracked vocals make for a fascinating composition, but I'm not sure the song ever quite gets over its goofy vocal refrain, and at eight-plus minutes, the lyric "It's a test" unfortunately becomes literalized. However, from my perspective, this is only misstep on the LP, which is otherwise brilliant. "Algerian Basses" oddly seems to have little or nothing in common with "Egyptian Basses," but instead seems to recall past moments when Coil engaged in experiments with their own brand of neo-exotica, mismatching instruments and musical modes to produce weirdly dislocated Interzone music (think "Babylero" or moments of *The Remote Viewer*).

This is something of a theme on

TNB

, with this track, "Princess Margaret," and "Careful" all containing hints of Orientalist musical fantasia. This shouldn't be a surprise given the fact that Sleazy's new

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projects—Threshold HouseBoys Choir and Soisong—both seem to draw liberally from the musical soundworlds of an English expatriate in Southeast Asia.

I've gone on record as being none too fond of Danny Hyde's solo work as Aural Rage, but aside from the perhaps overdone vocal mutations on "Nature Is A Language," there is very little indication here of the hyperactiveness and overproduced quality that marred his solo work. His skills as a producer and composer are kept on task throughout the album, and his contributions are subordinated to the collaboration. This brings us to "Copacabala (The Most Accomplished Surgeon)," which will be many people's favorite track on the album, as it contains a brilliantly twisted lyric by Balance, and sounds like the second track in the EBM record that Coil never made (the first being "Heaven's Blade"). A deliciously resonant, infectious beat construction (partly recycled from "Wir-Click-Wir" on the *Backwards*

tapes) sets the tone for Balance's bent intonations: "I am the most accomplished surgeon of moral deformities/I am professor of energy, Napoleonic electrifier of souls/Your glorious palaces are hospitals set amid cemeteries." Sure, it reads like Coil Mad Libs, but there is something magickal about the way it all comes together. Tracks like this prove that despite how bizarre and esoteric they could be at times, Coil didn't have to be as obscure as they were, and perhaps "Copacabala" is a wormhole into an alternate universe in which they pursued a career in more mainstream, palatable dark pop music.

"Paint Me As a Dead Soul" is the LP's most experimental track, a Nurse With Wound-like concoction of wandering piano and harpsichord melodies, creaks, sputters, hiccups, and Balance reading a dream monologue suggested by Aleister Crowley's anecdote in his *Confessions*

. It's a haunting and effective track, and a nice respite from the rest of the album, all of which heavily utilizes loops, rhythms and low-end sounds. It doesn't seem to take anything recognizable from the

Backwards

sessions, but "Princess Margaret's Man in the D'Jamalfina" is a near exact recreation of "Egyptian Bases," with perhaps a little hint of the strings in "Crumb Time" thrown in for good measure. As such, it is simulateously one of the most familiar and uncanny tracks on the album. Familiar because it follows the structure of those earlier sketches closely, and uncanny because it sounds so much more vibrant and new than the old demos, whose muddy, muted sounds I had gotten quite accustomed to. Either way, it's a brilliant track, occupying that weird liminal region that Coil mapped out so well: cryptic jazz, haunted melodies, idiosyncratic sampling and weird, druggy textures. At one point two-thirds of the way through the song, we hear a distorted voice saying "Okay, yeah." Who or what this is, we may never know, but it's little details like this that push

The New Backwards

over the top for me.

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If you haven't dropped the \$80.00 US to get the vinyl box set on which this is included, do not despair. It is a forgone conclusion that this will be released on CD, probably sooner than later, and a little bird tells me that when it is released digitally it will contain three more tracks in the same vein. *The New Backwards* is essential for Coil fans new and old, but more than that, it is a fascinating study in how to look backwards without becoming stagnant, how to move forward without forgetting the past. If there were a musical way to prove the existentialist assertion that the past and future are woven into every present moment, this would be it.

samples:

- [Careful What You Wish For](#)
- [Copacabbala \(The Most Accomplished Surgeon\)](#)
- [Princess Margaret's Man in the D's;Jamalfina](#)