

Brainwashed - Om, "God is Good"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Om's first studio album with Grails' Emil Amos on the drum throne contains some of the most confident, ambitious, unexpected, and brilliant work in the bands' history. Exasperatingly, however, there is not very much of it.

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The first indication that Al Cisneros has been seriously working towards expanding Om's sound comes instantly, as *God is Good* opens with the sound of a sitar. Given the band's conspicuous historical avoidance of anything other than the core bass and drums, this is a rather surprising sound to hear. However, the cavalcade of unexpected developments continues unabated throughout "Thebes," as the sitar is soon joined by piano, double-bass, and tabla. My initial gut reaction was dismay, as Indian instrumentation is such an obvious and hackneyed signifier that rock bands have employed for years to make it clear that their music is "mind-expanding" or "spiritual". However, I quickly forgot that, as "Thebes" unfolds into one of the best songs that Om has ever recorded.

At over 19 minutes, this massive opus takes up more than half the album, but displays such a masterful command of dynamics that it never starts to drag. Cisneros' bass playing continues to reach new levels of quiet virtuosity, alternating between clean, melodic passages and crushingly heavy, throbbing grooves. During the rare times he stomps his distortion pedal, he plays riffs that constantly shift and evolve to such a degree that they are no longer really riffs anymore: just the right notes intuitively played at the right time. His somnambulantly chanted vocals are equally striking, as he wrings an impressive degree of menace from words like "minaret" and "avatar." Notably (and much like Jorge Luis Borges), Al wields language with such erudition and skill that his lyrics often border on impenetrable ("Ablutes the sequence house of being-sheaths"). Fortunately, they still sound very convincing when he sings them. Most importantly, Emil Amos makes it quite clear that Chris Hakius's departure was not a mortal wound for the band. While Amos' drumming is certainly less aggressive and improvisatory than that of his predecessor, his relaxed and spacious playing complements Om's newly heightened clarity and melodicism quite beautifully.

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The second song, "Meditation is the Practice of Death," shows similar promise, as Al and Emil immediately lock into a laid-back and hypnotic groove. Amos is particularly amazing, as his slow-motion ride cymbal beat and inspired fills completely obscure the fact that the whole song is essentially a one-riff vamp. The trend of startling and unusual elements is continued, but the divergences here are lamentably not quite as successful. The notable exception is the inspired dub-influenced studio tweaking of Amos's fills into echoing rumbles. However, there is also some fairly inconsequential guitar(!) and a lengthy flute outro that proves to be the song's downfall. Actually, the flute solo is quite welcome and enjoyable at first, but it goes on for entirely too long and ends the song in a frustratingly anti-climactic fashion. It seems like Cisneros was at loss as to how to finish the song and just shrugged and stopped when he ran out of lyrics. The raw material for a truly killer track is amply evident, but feels like it was prematurely rushed to completion.

The flaws of "Meditation" are maddeningly exacerbated by the fact that it is essentially the last "real" song on this four-track album, as the second half consists solely of two faux-Middle Eastern instrumentals. The two segments of "Cremation Ghat" certainly have flashes of excellence (particularly the fluid, melodic bass playing in the second part), but they are also a bit one-dimensional and bombastic and certainly do not play to the band's strengths. They seem to occupy a stylistic no man's land between Tortoise and Muslimgauze that I suspect few are eager to see filled. While I am pleased that Om are aggressively pushing their sound into expanded realms, these experiments are not compelling enough to fit on the same album as what came before them and would have been better left unreleased or issued as bonus tracks.

That said, I still cannot stop listening to this album (though I usually start it over again when the flute solo comes in). Notably, *God is Good* was produced by Steve Albini, yet it is perversely the least raw album Om has ever made. It is a stunning sounding release anyway, as literally every nuance of Emil's drumming is audible. Some listeners may miss the churning intensity of Om's previous work, but I don't perceive any substantial decrease in power: the focus has merely shifted from artificial strength created by volume and overloaded signals to the much more human force of Al's portentous, shamanic vocals.

samples:

- [Thebes](#)
- [Meditation is the Practice of Death](#)
- [Cremation Ghat I](#)