

Brainwashed - Michael Hurley, "Ida Con Snock"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 11 October 2009 04:49 - Last Updated Tuesday, 13 October 2009 10:58



The irascible and idiosyncratic Michael Hurley has left an alternately memorable and inconsistent wake of releases behind him in his 40+ years of toiling in folk music's lunatic fringe, but he seems to be in the midst of a creative renaissance as of late. This eclectic, lived-in batch of songs is nothing revelatory, but oozes with shambling, offbeat charisma nonetheless.

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Michael Hurley's second release for the Gnomosong label is a creaky and charmingly relaxed collection of covers, Hurley classics, and new material. Michael's choice to collaborate with Ida and their friends seemed a bit odd to me at first, as his oft-wacky and sloppy aesthetic is quite dissimilar to Ida's somber introspection. Unexpectedly, however, there is quite a bit of chemistry between them: Hurley's songs benefit quite a bit by being backed by such a group of skilled musicians and Daniel Littleton and Elizabeth Mitchell's penchant for all things slow and sad often brings an unexpected emotional depth to Snock's eccentric lyricism. Also, it is extremely endearing to hear the Ida gang loosen-up, embrace their inner hillbillies, and kick out some swinging countrified jams (they even hoot like owls during "Hoot Owls").

The strongest songs, appropriately enough, are the gems culled from Hurley's own back catalogue. The shuffling, forlorn "Wildegeeses" is the album's clear highlight, as yodeling, whistling, and melancholy female backing vocals, harmonium, and steel guitar beautifully enhance Michael's heartbroken vocals. Also, the slowed-down pace and haunting viola/violin work from Hurley and Jean Cook transform 1977's "Hog of the Forsaken" into something darker and more powerful than the original. Of course, that darkness is the exception rather than the rule (this being Michael Hurley album after all), so there is also a great deal of irreverence and absurdity, such as the scat faux-trumpet solos (yes, plural) in Fats Domino's "Valley of Tears," the cheeky '50s homage "Going Steady," or the rollicking cover of the Ames Brothers' howlingly

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inane "Rag Mop." Fortunately, Hurley's sometimes cloying wackiness is much more palatable than usual with Ida's able backing and the more mindless moments are well-balanced by more substantial fare (particularly the traditional Irish medley "Loch Lomond/Molly Malone").

While there is no new material here that is as strong as the highlights from 2007's sparse *Ancstral Swamp*

,
Ida Con Snock

does not make any pretensions of being a bold artistic statement: this session is essentially just a bunch of like-minded musicians getting together to play some songs that they love, but the enthusiasm, unpolished charm, and informal back porch vibe of it all is difficult to resist. Rather than mellowing or fading into irrelevance, Hurley seems to only get more and more charismatic with age.

Samples:

- [Wildegeeses](#)
- [I Stole the Right to Live](#)
- [Hoot Owls](#)