

Brainwashed - Whitehouse, "Quality Time"

Written by Creag Dunton

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In the canon of Whitehouse, this is an odd release. It lacks the unabashed brutality of the early releases, the monotone sex-crazed sounds of the mid period, and is far more restrained than anything that has been released since. I think for that reason this has become, at least for me, their lost classic. Not lacking the caustic, angry vocals and genuinely disturbing moments of their discography, the other component is a very nuanced study of electronic textures, and an oh-so-subtle sense of humor and irony that really holds it all together.

[Susan Lawly](#)

iTunes

Whitehouse was a band that, in my early days of being in the "noise" scene, I intentionally went out of my way to avoid. They seemed to represent too many of the stereotypes that pervaded, i.e., serial killer worship, misogyny, sex obsession, etc. Once I was actually exposed to them via a mix tape ("Just Like A Cunt," from this album), my opinion shifted. Granted, those themes were still present, but the presentation was one different than I had anticipated. The track just simply clicked...sure, I by no means was a supporter of the lyrical content, but the way it was delivered was just undeniable. But we'll return to that later.

The band has always been focused on the darker side of society, but the previous releases stuck to a regular formula: up until about the release of *Right to Kill*, every album was shrill EDP Wasp noise, feedback, and William Bennett's manically shrieked, but undecipherable, vocals. At the mid-point of their career, they stripped the noise back some and allowed the vocals to be heard. The most notorious of these albums, *Great White Death*

, conjures images of loitering around seedy bookstores on the "bad" side of town, with sticky floored peep shows in the back and publications of questionable legality being

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carried out in non-descript paper bags. The vocals became the center point here, and the noise became more of a backing rather than a focus. Up through the Bret Easton Ellis obsessed *Never Forget Death* and the reverb drenched *Halogen*, the color changed from one of overt aggression and violence to a restrained menace.

The latter's title track and the short closer "The Way It Will Be" were, at least to me, much more unsettling than anything off of their previous work. The combination of Peter Sotos' misanthropic texts, Bennett's buried vocals, and extremely heavy reverb gave a sense of cold menace rather than sex crazed aggression. *Quality Time* kept the vibe, but pulled away the reverb and effects, leaving behind a slew of bizarrely organic textures, the origin of which I am still not sure of, but is the product of one of the last major Whitehouse and Steve Albini collaborations.

The album opens with "Told," a slow burning track of carefully controlled feedback and boiling analog textures. Bennett's vocals enter, first calm and then disgusted, eventually becoming maniacal and shrieked, chastising and taunting a non-existent sex worker. Structurally, the track is one of the most musical bits of noise recorded. For a genre (and band) criticized for being nothing but formless chaos, there is a very song-like progression in both the backing sound and the vocals.

The longer title track that follows begins with the same alien sense of sonic disconnect, unfamiliar textures that grind away as the vocals shriek alongside. The same restrained feedback textures of "Told" with a raw, nauseous analog clicking acting as rhythm to the shrill noise's melody. Lyrically a combination of Peter Sotos' filth and a porn director pushing an actress to do a little more than she's willing to creates an unsettling atmosphere to say the least, and Bennett's clipped, overly affected vocals only add to the sense of discomfort. The dynamic level actually stays rather close to ambient territory, with only the vocals pushing everything into abrasive pastures. As an instrumental it'd be a slow sparse study of unnatural analog textures.

At the mid-point of this album is perhaps the most bizarre and uncomfortable pieces of sound anyone has ever committed to record, and it may simply be an example of context more than content. "Baby" is, ostensibly, just a recording of a baby playing in the bathtub with some nearly inaudible subsonic synthesizer noise. The standard child babbling and noises are there with really no processing. The voice of the child does sound like it may have a bit of effects placed on it, but otherwise it stays rather untouched. Other than the minor effects and

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multitracking to the voice, there's nothing sinister at all here, but placed into the context of a Whitehouse album, and this particular Whitehouse album at that, it is extremely uncomfortable to hear. Sitting right in the middle of the album is "Execution," five minutes of unadulterated synth noise that, other than the undulating chugging rhythmic elements, sounds more like the Incapacitants or other highly regarded Japanese artists than anything usually labeled "power electronics." It bears more than a passing resemblance to the earlier Whitehouse albums, so perhaps it is a bit of nostalgia more than anything else.

"Just Like A Cunt," here the Philip Best version, is perhaps the track that shows what Whitehouse evolved into for their most recent releases. Sonically it is a simplistic track: the backing sounds like a broken alarm clock and boiling water, but the centerpiece is the vocals. Philip Best delivers the lyrics with a venom that I have never heard anywhere else, snarling and screaming the misogynist lyrics like someone moments before a murder. Rather than Bennett's penchant for going into unhinged shrieks and screams, Best keeps his anger focused and directed. The untreated and coherent vocals became the focus once the acclaimed *Cruise* was released some years later. For anyone who takes the lyrics at face value, it should be noted that much of them are appropriated from Bob Dylan's "Just Like a Woman," with a few words substituted, placing it more as a parody or character study than a truly spirited piece of woman-bashing. There also exists a take of this track with William Bennett's lead vocals, but given their bizarre tone and delivery, along with its limited release (on a one track Japanese 3" single only), I've always considered to be more of a joke at the fan's expense than anything else.

The closing "Once and for All" is the culmination of all of the restraint shown from the prior tracks: white noise, shrill squeals, and Bennett's entirely undecipherable vocals, with almost everything other than the title sounding like the self-directed rantings of someone in a mental institution. While *Halogen* ended with the quiet reflection of "The Way it Will Be," restraint is thrown out the window here, and the manic fury of the track heralds the intensity that would follow two years later on the fully digital *Mummy and Daddy*

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Whitehouse were always, and continue to be a polarizing force in electronic music. There are many who despise them for their subject matter, others who embrace them for the same thing, and those such as myself who take none of it at face value but instead look at it as a merely a study of dark and unpopular topics. In the Whitehouse canon, this one is overlooked for the likes of *New Britain* (for its pure sonic brutality), *Great White Death* (for its prurience) or *Cruise* (for the vocal intensity), but it stands out on its own as an odd bit of synth textures and lyrics that unsurprisingly delve into the darkest reaches of the human psyche. Regardless of one's position on the lyrics,

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is one of the albums that, with the vocals totally removed, would still stand strongly on its own in the world of sound art. The electronic textures here are the star, and the vocals just add an even more tangible darkness to the one the music creates on its own.

samples:

- [Told](#)
- [Baby](#)
- [Just Like a Cunt \(PB Vocal Version\)](#)