

## Brainwashed - Songs: Ohia, "Magnolia Electric Co. (10th Anniversary Deluxe Edition)"

Written by Lucas Schleicher

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Two forces define Jason Molina's entire career: work—he was almost obsessively dedicated to his craft—and his band. In 2003 he brought these forces to Steve Albini's Electrical Audio in Chicago and, with nine other musicians, caught lightning in a bottle. Up to that point Molina had made a case for his being a great songwriter, but on *Magnolia Electric Co.* he became a great bandleader. Those nine other musicians share the spotlight with him on these eight songs, and rightfully so. They're an integral reason

*Magnolia*

ended up one of the best rock 'n' roll records ever recorded.

### [Secretly Canadian](#)

From his debut 7" in 1996 until 2003 Jason Molina's band changed with virtually every new release. He played and recorded with Arab Strap, Richard Youngs, Geof Comings, Jonathan Cargill, Mike Mogis, Edith Frost, Dave Fischhoff, Alasdair Roberts, and many others; too numerous to count here.

These are the people, as much as Molina, who made Songs: Ohia what it was. Jason knew this and admitted it in various interviews. With *Magnolia Electric Co.* he acknowledged it, and practically handed the album over to his friends and fellow musicians.

The big themes come first: transformation, doubt, partnership, work, and fate—Jason's magical lyricism rides on top of these concerns. He communes with spectral guides and ghostly conspirators; presents deserts, flowers, and ghost towns as trail cairns for lovesick wanderers; and draws Comiskey Park together with the ancient light of distant stars. He writes about broad spaces, thoughts, and inner experiences, and then brings them to life with these details.

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Until, in the album's penultimate moment, as "John Henry Split My Heart" nearly flies off the rails, Molina reels the band's energy in for just a few lines. In the equivalent of a rock 'n' roll soliloquy, he sings, "Boy what you gonna do with your heart in two?" He replies, "Only if it's good enough, half I'm gonna use to pay this band. Half I'm saving, 'cause I'm gonna owe 'em."

Jason Molina was undoubtedly a great songwriter. As his solo albums, numerous solo bootlegs, and the newly reissued *Magnolia* demos show, he could carry a song all on his own, sometimes just on the strength of his voice. For the 2003 recording session, he had worked out all the lyrics in advance, knew the basic chords and shapes the songs would take, and maybe even knew how everything would fit together. A few of those songs had been tested on the road the year before too, with a band in tow. But incredibly several of the album's most memorable melodies aren't there in the demos, or even in the pre-album live versions.

Jim Grabowski's floating Wurlitzer accompaniment on "Just Be Simple," Dan Macadam's dancing violin on "The Old Black Hen," Dan Sullivan's angular guitar playing, even Mike Brenner's lap steel lead on "Farewell Transmission"—they were all almost unbelievably invented by the musicians, in the studio, on the spot, without the benefit of knowing the songs well in advance, using overdubs to fix mistakes, or having rehearsal time. Jason wasn't kidding about owing them.

That spontaneity gives the music its loose, anything-could-happen feel; the sort of rambling, improvisational quality that causes listeners to draw connections to country and gospel music when they hear the album. Molina's ideas, what he brought to the table as a writer, pull the record in the opposite direction. He's the one that makes the music sound tightly wound; it's his ability as a leader that makes it all sound inevitable.

And that says nothing of the incredible rhythm section Jason had in Jeff Panall and Rob Sullivan, or of Jennie Benford's haunting harmonies, or of spectacular start on side B, where he gives up the mic to Lawrence Peters and Scout Niblett on "The Old Black Hen" and "Peoria Lunch Box Blues." Jason disappears into both of those songs, making it hard to say where he even is in the mix. They're his songs sure enough, but it's the team that's making them sing. Other bands have worked in a similar way, but few have left so much to the fates and come out the other end with an album that sounds as confident and energetic as *Magnolia Electric Co.*

To the inclusion of the reissued demos, this 10th anniversary edition adds two studio

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recordings; one brand new, one difficult to find until now. Acoustic versions for both songs were featured on the demo disc in the album's limited first edition, but the big draw for anyone who has those already are these studio additions. "The Big Game Is Every Night" was previously available on the Japanese edition of the album, but thank God it's finally available domestically because it's stunning, and almost perfectly embodies the entire album. Above a dark, swirling mass of droning strings, Molina delivers urgent line after urgent line of historical images, references, and self-accusations that only he could have imagined. Cutting it from the record must have been painful, but it's such a massive black hole of a tune that it would have swallowed all the light around it. It makes perfect sense on its own, after the album has ended, or on the 10" that comes with the vinyl version.

"Whip-Poor-Will," on the other hand, falls a bit flat. The demo version is great, and the studio treatment it received on *Josephine* is heart-rending, but the *Magnolia* version simply sounds incomplete, as if Jason and Jennie Benford had a good idea, but couldn't find a way to make it work with the time they had.

Hearing it reinforces just how perfect everything else is. Unbelievable is a good word for it, and maybe lucky too. But good bands make their own luck, and this band was as good as they come. As good as the ones Dylan had in '64 and '65, as rough and powerful as [Crazy Horse](#), at times as heavy and as energetic as [Hendrix, Redding, and Mitchell](#). Together, these ten musicians could go toe to toe with anyone, and that's not hyperbole. Make no doubt about it, it's a fact; true like the [solid earth](#). All you have to do to know it is listen.

samples:

- [Almost Was Good Enough](#)
- [The Big Game Is Every Night](#)
- [Whip-Poor-Will \(Demo\)](#)