

Brainwashed - Snakefarm, "My Halo at Half-Light"

Written by Duncan Edwards

Sunday, 20 November 2011 17:07 - Last Updated Monday, 21 November 2011 02:20



Long-time musical partners Anna Domino and Michael Delory take ten songs from the public domain and recreate them in their own image: the cool detachment of Domino's voice and non-traditional arrangements contrasting with narratives of treachery and murder. As they previously did in 1999 with their much-heralded album *Songs from My Funeral*.

[Fledg'ling Records](#)

The mid-1980s saw the significant, but still under-appreciated, Les Disques du Crepuscule label sprouting out of Brussels. The city was a magnet for artists such as Cabaret Voltaire, Tuxedomoon, Michael Nyman, Wim Mertens, Billy MacKenzie, The Durutti Column, and Paul Haig*. This Belgian landscape also included Anna Domino whose 1984 mini-album *East and West*

contained "Land of My Dreams," a distinctive version of an Aretha Franklin song and a good starting point for describing Snakefarm. The melancholy intensity in "Land of My Dreams" comes from the dreamy, repetitive, musical backdrop in combination with Domino's hypnotic, non-emotive, singing. Somehow these two (apparently effortless) aspects combined to create a sad remnant of passion and yearning. I believe the marvelous Virginia Astley may have contributed piano and backing vocals to the record, too.

As Les Disques du Crepuscule slowly faded away, Delory and Domino relocated to Arizona and eventually re-emerged as Snakefarm. I haven't heard the 1999 recording but its success means that *My Halo at Half-Light* will be both much anticipated and also cast in a shadow of expectation. This album is more textured than the Anna Domino of the Brussels period and solo releases, yet a pervading aura of nothingness remains intact. In a sense, these new versions of old folk songs have a strong sensibility of North America, reflecting the other-worldly landscapes out in the mythical West, the feeling of vastness and absence, and the hollow familiarity of the same retail outposts studding the lonely highways. The music doesn't all work for me, as I find the rhythms of "Darlin' Corey," for instance, irritating (almost a pastiche of the word "tasteful") and prefer the hypnotic repetitive aspects to those where the pace is varied and the singing rather more "normal."

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In those sections, as with "Land of My Dreams," the seemingly dispassionate playing and singing allows the songs to breathe and for feelings about the bloody, deceitful, tragic narratives to remain open to interpretation. The clarity of production ensures every word is audible and that some odd realizations and connections can emerge; not least that Staggerlee may be viewed as less a heroic legend and more a complete bastard capable of shooting another person despite them pleading not to widow their wife and render their children fatherless. The worthless John Lewis is also laid bare in "Omie Wise," drowning his pregnant girlfriend while her defences, and possibly her knickers, are down. "The Lady O" manages to sound airy and splendidly terse but also like an imaginary discarded sketch for early OMD and Roger McGuinn's 12-string to collaborate on the theme tune for spoof television cooking show *Posh Nosh*.

A cynic might remark that the only thing America loves more than vastness and violence is the thought of assured redemption. If so, the album closer "Michael" (as in "Michael rowed the boat ashore. Alleluia") is an apt ending. At first sounding like a hilarious nod to the oft-quoted debt owed to Anna Domino by Portishead, this sparse piece is a strange, slight, yet satisfying version of an old gospel song (long ago rendered virtually unbearable and meaningless by the kumbaya crowd).

Several Les Disques du Crepuscule recordings have been reissued by LTM.

* As noted by Anat Pack for the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*.