

Terje Isungset, "Igloo"

Contributed by Matthew Amundsen
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Norway's Terje Isungset returns to the Ice Hotel for his follow-up to 2002's *Iceman Is*. Like that album, all the instruments used are made from ice, including ice percussion, iceofon, icehorn, and iceharp. Joining him is Sidsel Endresen, who co-wrote many of the songs and contributes vocals, for an album of ethereal, crystalline beauty.

All Ice

Such an undertaking is no easy task. Not only must the instruments be created on the spot, but so do the soundproof igloos in which they're to be recorded. The blocks of ice themselves must be perfect, without bubbles or dirt, to be suitable. Chainsaws remove the bulk of extraneous material before knives whittle down the pieces further. Since the ice is delicate and often breaks during the process, there may be several false starts before an instrument is considered acceptable.

The music that results is surprisingly warm even though the compositions themselves are frequently skeletal. The ice possesses an organic timbre much like breath so that the spaces between notes never feel empty. The bass drum resonates more deeply than I expected, while the other percussion, and iceofon, hit like falling rain.

Most of the songs are ambient and meditative, letting the listener absorb their atmospheric qualities as much as their melodies. Other than on tracks like "Song" or "Wisdom," the singing tends to be more pitch than language, or gets guttural like on "Iceman 2," soaring alongside the drones and overtones of the other instruments. "Bird" even finds the voice evoking its namesake as if surveying the wintry landscape from high above. The most active track on the album is "Mammoth," finding propulsion in rhythm, a faint mechanical-sounding echo, and wheezing horns that race to the finish.

I wish liner notes detailing the procedure or at least photographs of the instruments had been included, but perhaps that would spoil some of the mystique. Even so, the disc comes with a vial of water embedded in the jewel case, symbolically uniting the product and the process. The music surpasses the gimmickry, however, sharing unique sounds that otherwise would go unheard. Although the album could have used more changes in tempo at times, perhaps that would only ultimately distract from the deliberate peacefulness of the locale and the music itself.

samples:

- Song
- Bird
- Mammoth