

## Brainwashed - Fehler Kuti, "Professional People"

Written by Duncan Edwards

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Seeing this release announced as music for "squares" or gated communities, unlikely to appeal to your "woke friends" made me approach it as one might any potential minefield. Learning that Julian Warner, aka Fehler Kuti, is a cultural anthropologist, actor, writer, editor, speaker, art festival curator and producer didn't lighten the mood much as I feared an onslaught of dry polemic. What a relief then to simply get hooked by these hypnotic tunes - several of which were lullabies for Warner's newborn child. *Professional People* reveals as a transcultural concept album, lightly touched with softly spoken wit, 8-bit space jazz, cosmic Euro-pulse, pan, chant, Afro-neon groove, wordless harmony, and melancholic synth. Some of the song titles can act as political signposts, but lyrics are few, mostly oblique, and any message subliminal: hidden in plain sight amid references to bureaucracy, cars, office buildings, home, leisure, gardens, and security. There is no holy indigestible agitprop, no denial of anyone else's struggle, and Warner leaves academic language and analyses of class, race, and history for the books. He's razor sharp, but kind, and rather than cutting with words he sprinkles sardonic humor and personal history in with broader observations. The whole record invites everyone to swing along together in our various states of alienated inclusion. Phew. I won't hear many more enjoyable albums this year.

### [Alien Transistor](#)

With the aid of stalwarts from The Notwist, Fehler Kuti builds a laid back sound with drive but also plenty of breathing space. Markus Acher's brilliant drumming is key, and Micha Acher adds sousaphone and trumpet flourishes. Equally, Sascha Schwegeler's steel drum helps make "Transatlantic Ideology" a standout track. Here Kuti gently references a popcultural and socio-theoretical Afro-Americanophilia in Germany that must be addressed as it deflects from anti-racist movements and away from other racist exploitations (systematic exclusion of Romani people, capitalist exploitation of eastern European migrant laborers). Off record he points out that Black Germans do not make up a racialized labor underclass, so in this sense the leftist fetish of the African American plight is devoid of its revolutionary potential when directed at the Black German. I say "gently" but, as with several stunning lines laid into the fabric of this album "Is a black man humanoid?" made me jump. I uncomfortably recalled the satirical essay "Are The Jews Human?" which got that awkward old stick Wyndham Lewis into a spot of critical bother. Whereas Lewis was brilliant but easily depicted as a brute, Warner's unflinching honesty about his own status as a professional "manager of color" is his calling card. He insists his class

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are using the paradigm of diversity as a tool to escape their fate, without changing the class relations as a whole. Who better, then, to warn us: "This song is a song to end all ties, to say goodbye to old, and say hello to new, lies." If that sounds heavy, it's actually as catchy as The Bonzo Dog Band doing "Terry Keeps His Clips On."

The album title alludes to the professional managerial class identified by Barbara and John Ehrenreich in 1977. The Ehrenreich's argued that this group opposes the dominant capitalist owners yet views itself with some elitism as distinct from the working class. The PMC, they argued, should do away with its condescension and elitism, go beyond bread and butter issues and make peace with the working class about art, culture, divisions of labor, psychology, and sexuality. This I simply have got to see.

Warner as Fehler Kuti has taken this lesson on board and does not get bogged down with explanations. He does not act as if he is in a minefield at all, and navigates it with ease. He hints and drops mystery instead of pointing or preaching. The album takes the form of musical massage to peacefully entice our relaxed senses towards toe-tapping and humming along. Many of the pieces feel like accompaniment for dancers doing short scenes in a stage play. Indeed the album is partly an offshoot of Warner's play *The History of the Federal Republic of Germany as told by Fehler Kuti und Die Polizei*

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The pounding "Deutsche Passe" probably considers how the "foreign" may have a German passport but not be saved from the consequences of lingering post-Moneterist policy - at least that's my take - but the robo-beat and groove dominates, even when the hideous Thatcherite "there's no such thing as society" chorus arrives. "Automobile Love" throbs and hums with the lonely power of homogenous traffic heading to shared environmental oblivion, perhaps. The strange wobbly-sounding "Dark Boys" is another highlight. It touches on the notion that a certain group serve a useful purpose in being forever cast as stereotypical aggressor, victim, noble hero, or scapegoat, yet it's atmosphere of hyper-mournful dirge is the key factor. Just as slow, and thought provoking, is "Doggerland" with the repeated lines "This garden we had built for our children"... "the garden's gone." A garden image has often been used in art as a symbol of broken dreams or lost innocence, from the Garden of Eden to the walled estate of the filmic Finzi-Continis, wherein a group of Italian jews devote their time and energy playing tennis in the sun, oblivious to the rising threat of Fascism.

*Professional People* benefits from some lovely instrumental pieces, and passages, which encase the aforementioned soft vocals and serious-as-your-life concepts in a protective shell of synths and delightfully sparse instrumentation worthy of the first couple of Aksak Maboul

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recordings. "Bürgebäude In Und Um Frankfurt" (Office Buildings In and Around Frankfurt) for example, has a comfortingly familiar sense of bland bureaucracy. "In Every City, In Every Aldi, The Blood of My Brothers and Sisters Taints Your Spargel" bubbles and twitches harmlessly like a backing track for an old school magician doing tricks. Eventually, Katja Kobolt speaks a few lyrics in Bosnian. This is one of two songs with a guest vocalist, as Warner does most of the singing and backing vocals himself. The title track is my least favorite, but thereafter the album hits an oblique and bizarre flow worthy of the fabulously impenetrable (and commercially disastrous) 1980s legends Sudden Sway. By which I mean it constructs a world unto itself as the consistently good tunes, snaking shapeshifting rhythms and quietly subversive mockery really get going. The Residents come to mind, as does Sun Ra, and there's a clear nod to Grandmaster Flash on "Freizeit 20."

On "Home," Warner sings "If I ever enter history, what will the West have in store for me?" Another cool line, and also a veiled reference to the heartbreaking plight of one black couple who fought with the British in WWII and settled in Germany. In the 1970s they lived in fear that their past military actions exposed them to the threat of kidnap and murder by the Red Brigade. The irony of anti-imperial leftists evoking terror in the hearts and minds of former imperial subjects is tragic. As is the added ironic layer of those former imperial subjects becoming die hard conservatives in the hope of surviving the tides of time with their newly gained privileges intact. Like a funky komische W.E.B. Du Bois, Fehler Kuti strongly suggests that Germany, at least, has reached a biographical, political and historical juncture where the trajectories of race and class, once convergent, now drift apart. Although, as with the sublime final track "Wohlfart," which twinkles like Neu! fronted by Cathal Coughlan at his most endearing, you just won't realize it from the clever way Warner/Kuti has styled his message.

[samples available here](#)