

Brainwashed - Dean McPhee, "Witch's Ladder"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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At this point in his career, each new Dean McPhee release feels like a legitimate event, as he surfaces quite rarely and always hits me with at least one absolutely stunning piece when he does. Consequently, this review could probably be condensed to merely "Dean McPhee has a new album," as that would convey everything necessary to perk up the ears of most people already familiar with his body of achingly beautiful, slow-burning guitar magic. Unsurprisingly, *Witch's Ladder*

does nothing to dash those dauntingly high expectations, as it picks up right where 2017's *Four Stones*

left off and that one was a very strong contender for McPhee's finest album. And now *Witch's Ladder*

is a strong contender for that honor as well. Beyond that, the only salient details are that the cover art comes from visionary symbolist painter Agnes Pelton and that the album's second half is a near-perfect two-song run of hauntingly sublime beauty.

Hood Faire

Given his association with the Folklore Tapes milieu, McPhee's unusual choice of cover art is not a surprise, but it is a telling detail that provides some insight into what he seems to be reaching towards with his own work. When reading The Whitney's description of last year's Pelton exhibition, I was repeatedly struck by phrases like "meditative stillness," "shimmering veils of light," and "awareness of a world that lay behind physical appearances." All of those phrases are apt for the five songs of *Witch's Ladder* as well, but McPhee admirably finds an ingenious array of ways to get there. That said, the pieces do all share a rough foundational aesthetic of "fingerpicked 'folk music' played on an electric guitar," though each either ultimately builds into something considerably more transcendent or blossoms into quietly beautiful psychedelia in the margins. All are excellent and feature emotively smoldering or lyrically melodic solos at their core, but the most interesting twists occur in the final three pieces (in ascending order of brilliance, no less). In "Red Lebanese," for example, the winding and languorously smoke-like melody fitfully evokes a trippy synth spiraling off into space, while

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"Eksdale Path" unexpectedly coheres into a killer "dual-guitar harmony" passage. As much as I love "Eksdale Path," however, it is immediately eclipsed by the epic closer, as "Witch's Ladder" is basically three songs' worth of killer ideas seamlessly blended into one. In fact, I had not even finished typing "sounds like the twin-guitar attack of classic Iron Maiden just dropped by for a surprisingly tasteful cameo" before it turned into a hallucinatory duel between intertwining forwards and backwards guitar melodies (or at least a convincing illusion of it). It is a characteristically mesmerizing bit of show-stealing slow-motion sorcery, but the show already quite wonderful beforehand, as there truly is not a single wasted note on this album.

Witch's Ladder

is another instant classic from Dean McPhee.

Samples can be found [here](#) .