

Brainwashed - Bombay Lunatic Asylum, "Mad Song"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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People often grumble about how music used to be better and that usually just means that they are either looking in the wrong places or not paying close enough attention, but every now and then I get blindsided by something from decades past that makes me concede that there is indeed some truth to that stance. I mention that because Louise Landes Levi is one of the few remaining artists from the late '60s Mills College/NYC avant-garde golden age who is both active and seemingly still in her creative prime. Admittedly, her discography was quite sparse until the last decade or so (much like that of Catherine Christer Hennix), but the woefully delayed appreciation of Levi's work feels like it was less due to sexism and a challenging vision than because documenting her art seems like trying to capture lightning in a bottle. Fortunately, Slow Tapes' Bart De Paepe was up for the challenge and Bombay Lunatic Asylum is a recently formed trio that brings out some of Levi's best work. In practical terms, that mostly means that De Paepe and Koen Vandenhoudt just hung back, made some drones, and (presumably) watched in awe as Levi unleashed an passionate and fiery sarangi tour de force that calls to mind a Zen Paginini. This album is amazing.

[Oaken Palace](#)

There are technically three songs on *Mad Song*, but it is very easy forget that anything exists other than the haunting and incendiary opener "The Mental Traveller." Over a backdrop of harmonium drones, Levi unleashes a raw, viscerally cutting, and almost possessed-sounding sarangi showcase that calls to mind a pagan ritual in which a sensuous dance reaches such a fevered intensity that the dancer drops dead afterward. It is incredibly powerful and moving, yet also impressively hallucinatory. In fact, the macabre ballet feels both feral and almost supernatural, as the many animal-like sounds Levi coaxes from her sarangi sometimes feel like an anguished flock of birds dispersing in fear because the dancing, howling melodies are simply too primal and darkly erotic to handle. It also sounds like Levi has a magic homemade effects pedal that makes everything sounds unnaturally and vividly tactile and earthy (quite a neat trick). I believe Vandenhoudt also plays sarangi on that opening piece, as there are some overlapping melodies and drones, but he switches to the shruti box for the more mournful and meditative "Ancient Times." Unsurprisingly, it is yet another gem, but Levi's playing is considerably more lyrically melodic and the drones play much more of a central role, imbuing the piece with a densely buzzing and lazily oscillating seismic heft (they almost sound electronic, in fact). Despite the slight dip in intensity, "Ancient Times" is nonetheless

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impassioned and unconventional in its own right, as Levi unleashes some mind-burrowing harmonic squeals and the trio's drones seem to conjure the otherworldly harmonies of Just Intonation (though that may just be an illusion). The album ends with a brief vocal coda/comedown in which Levi sings William Blake's "Mad Song" over another harmonium backdrop, approximating something akin to a lovely but simple Kink Gong piece or great Sublime Frequencies find. It all amounts to a truly wonderful and singular album, as listening to *Mad Song* feels like an almost ecstatically religious experience.

Samples can be found [here](#) .