

Brainwashed - Ashley Paul, "Lost in Shadows"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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It has been roughly four years since Ashley Paul's last album and I was beginning to despair, but she has been busy moving to London and becoming a mother. While the latter is not particularly conducive to tirelessly crafting brilliant experimental music, she somehow still managed to compose her finest album to date during a brief residency in Spain. Characteristically, the pointillist, prickly dissonance of Jandek is probably the nearest touchstone, yet Paul radically transforms that stark foundation into something sensuous and eerily beautiful (sometimes even embellishing it with perversely festive splashes of color). In fact, a few pieces even sound like grotesque caricatures of nursery rhymes (Paul's baby was perhaps a subconscious and subversive muse), which only deepens *Lost in Shadows'* dreamily wraithlike and otherworldly spell. While it can definitely be a challenging, dissonant, and disturbing listen at times, *Shadows* is unquestionably Paul's masterpiece.

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The album opens in truly inspired fashion, as the lurching and woozy "Blanquita" feels like a nightmarish parade of dead-eyed stuffed animals (very much establishing the darkly surreal tone of everything to follow). I love everything about "Blanquita," as almost every element feels broken, wrong, or drugged in some way, yet it still maintains a zombie-like forward motion and a strong melodic theme. It also highlights a notable feature of *Lost in Shadows*: a tendency towards brief and erratic song structures: "Blanquita" clocks in at just over 90 seconds and only a couple of pieces ever crack the 4-minute mark. On a different album, that might signal a sketch-like, unfinished quality or a dearth of ideas, yet it seems absolutely perfect here, as *Shadows*

feels like a flickering and elusive funhouse of creepy dreams. Each individual piece is like a glimmering shard from a fragmented whole and I never know what shape I will get or what it might blossom into. For example, the following "Reflection" initially feels like a lilting lullaby over an obsessively repeated and dissonant arpeggio, but unexpectedly opens into a far more texturally and harmonically rich vista after about 30-seconds: the chords start changing, a groaning cello melody appears, a second vocal track adds new harmonies, and bowed strings start skittering, scraping, and stumbling drunkenly across the soundscape. "Bounce Bounce" is similarly radical and revelatory, unfolding as an insistent tuba groove over some off-kilter hand

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percussion that precariously teeters between queasily dissonant saxophone howls and something that sounds like a hapless string quartet who wandered into the wrong session.

While this album is essentially a wonderfully disorienting cavalcade of inventively strange and ghostly vignettes, there are still a couple of pieces that still stand out as highlights. The album's centerpiece is the languorously flowing "Night Howl," which feels like somnambulant ghost-poetry floating through a lysergic landscape of broken arpeggios, tuba drones, churning cellos, and alternately strangled and whimpering saxophones. I also love the jaggedly stumbling and skwonking cabaret of the damned that is "Breathless Air." Paul has a real genius for evoking what an undead jazz ensemble might sound like, distracted wandering into melodies and flubbing random notes as fingers fall off or skeletal appendages scrabble hopelessly at the fretboards of their rusted and rotting instruments. Nevertheless, she always finds a way to make her macabre tableaux feel weirdly tender and childlike, like a glimpse of a disarmingly loving and innocent moment in some kind of German Expressionist house of horrors. There are occasionally even moments of relatively pure beauty, such as the gently lilting "Two Ships," which provide a nice counterbalance to the more outré moments like "What Happens" (which sounds a badly malfunctioning animatronic jazz ensemble).

As much as I love Ashley Paul's previous work, she seems to have truly outdone herself with *Lost in Shadows*

, as this album feels like straining floodgates were finally opened and a rapturous torrent of backlogged great ideas poured out. This is the rare album where my favorite song is constantly changing and there is nothing at all that can be dismissed as uninspired (though the 30-second "The Between" is a bit too insubstantial to make much of a mark). There is simply so much to be delighted by here, as Paul masterfully weaves together all sorts of seemingly disparate instrumental and emotional threads and somehow makes it all feel seamless and natural. No one else could make an avant-garde album that is simultaneously fragile, pretty, radical, darkly sensuous, unsettling, melodic, and deeply hallucinatory that feels equally influenced by modern classical, free jazz, and a demented clown making crude balloon noises. And every single piece is distilled to absolute glittering perfection: Ashley never overstays her welcome and repeatedly packs an incredible amount of emotional heft and intensity into just a minute or two. Every piece is like another memorable set piece in compelling abstract/fractured narrative arc—it is like I am watching a doomed love affair unfold at an eerie carnival that is taking place inside a snow globe: far too creepy and unnerving to be whimsical, but too pretty and delicate to be completely nightmarish as well.

Lost in Shadows

is truly a singular album, conjuring an extremely vivid shadow-world into being that seethes with hidden mystery, depth, and anguish. I suspect it would be absolutely heartbreaking to actually live in its permanently twilight, matchstick fantasia, but it is certainly an unforgettable and deeply haunting place to visit. I love this album.

Samples:

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- [Blanquita](#)
- [Night Howl](#)
- [Breathless Air](#)