

Brainwashed - Celer, "Xièxie"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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It would be great if there was some simple way for casual Celer fans like myself to easily distinguish Will Long's major statements from the ceaseless flow of minor releases, but there seem to be glaring exceptions to every system that I have attempted to devise. In the case of *Xièxie*

, however, Long helpfully took the guesswork out of the matter, as this might be the most heavily promoted album that he has ever released. Happily, his instincts have proven to be well-founded, as

Xièxie

definitely ranks among the upper tier of his overwhelming oeuvre. I would probably stop short of calling it a start-to-finish masterpiece or my personal favorite Celer album, but I would be hard-pressed to think of anyone else churning out ambient/drone music as enveloping and sublimely lovely as

Xièxie

's bookends.

[Two Acorns](#)

It is admittedly a bit redundant to mention that *Xièxie* ("thank you") is an album inspired by bittersweetly beautiful memories of a specific time and place, as transforming lingering memory fragments into lush, soft-focus dreamscapes has been Will Long's stock-in-trade since Celer's very beginnings. However, I definitely appreciate the poetic reminiscence that Long wrote as an album description. For one, it establishes a lovely and evocative context: two lovers once took a train trip from Shanghai to Hangzhou, a period that is now distilled to a series of flickering images of neon lights, rain, birds, and blurred scenery seen through the window of a speeding train. Moreover, that literary component is vital to understanding and appreciating the full scope and depth of this project: without it, it is very easy to view Celer's oeuvre as a vast ocean of similar-sounding releases. To be sure, Long is quite good at what he does, so even a run-of-the-mill Celer album can be enjoyable, but there are a lot of relatively interchangeable albums for every landmark release. One could argue that the latter is only possible through Long's seemingly obsessive work ethic, but one could also argue that those less exceptional moments could have simply been kept in the vault rather than released. However, that would undercut the larger vision (or at least what I imagine that vision to be): Celer is like a vast impressionist diary or novel unfolding in real-time. Some chapters are certainly more vivid and

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memorable than others, but they are all integral parts of the whole's gradually unfolding arc.

Much like the work of William Basinski, most Celer albums religiously adhere to a distinctive template of simple loops repeated into infinity—the biggest difference between the two artists is primarily one of scale, as Long traffics in a kind of slow-motion, widescreen grandeur. In that respect, *Xièxie* is textbook Celer, as each piece is an elegiac procession of dreamlike, billowing chords that beautifully approximates massive clouds lazily rolling across a vast horizon. The tone is almost always one of sublime melancholy, but Long has proven himself to be a master at articulating different shades of that narrow emotional range by deftly manipulating lightness and density. The midsection of *Xièxie* is populated with one lengthy and archetypal variation of that aesthetic after another, though they are interspersed with brief interludes of field recordings made during the trip. Each substantial piece meets Celer's usual high standard of quality, but the subtle divergences from the formula that open and close the album stand out as the most compelling and distinctive pieces. In the case of the opening "Rains Lit By Neon," Long simply allows the field recordings and his music to bleed together so that his heavenly chord swells slowly fade into a collage of street sounds. It seems like the most obvious thing in the world, but it very effectively creates an illusion of added depth.

The twist is similarly minimal and effective on closing "Our Dream to be Strangers," as the central theme sounds like a fragment snatched from an especially majestic bit of synth-centric '70s space music or prog. It still ultimately sounds a hell of a lot like a Celer piece though, as the loop seems to leave a lingering and hazy vapor trail that obscures it more and more with each repetition. The moral here is that it does not take much innovation at all to make a Celer song stand out from the pack. Of the two excursions, however, I am most fascinated by the artful collage of field recordings overlapping those first few minutes of "Rains Lit By Neon," as I do not understand why Long does not make that a recurring, defining trait of his work. Given that he is an expat living in Japan, his field recordings certainly seem unique and interesting to me as a listener. Also, from an artistic standpoint, it seems like Celer's entire aesthetic is an abstract evocation of specific places and moments. As such, it would make perfect thematic sense to include the actual sounds of those places for added texture and enigmatic meaning. Goddamn it—now it sounds like I am complaining about an album that I genuinely enjoy: the important thing here is that *Xièxie* is an excellent album. Its flashes of greater inspiration unavoidably remind me that Long is a visionary artist who too often disguises himself as a solid ambient composer, but I am damn grateful that those flashes of inspiration exist.

Samples can be found [here](#) .