

Brainwashed - Zachary Paul, "A Meditation on Discord"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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I almost slept on this unexpectedly incendiary delight, as it deceptively seemed like just another solid drone album based on my initial and brief exposure to it. Then I noticed that Anna von Hausswolff had described it as "This is just.... wow." Given that she does not seem at all like the sort to be floored easily, I revisited *A Meditation of Discord* for a proper listen. I found myself sharing her sentiment by the end of the opening "Premonition," as Paul and his violin unleash a slow-burning and breathtaking one-man apocalypse in real time. To some degree, it is undeniably Paul's masterful live loop manipulation that makes that piece such a beguiling and impressive feat, but even if he had a full band and a limitless studio budget at his disposal, its fiery crescendo could not be any more harrowing and visceral . While he regrettably tones down his more volcanic impulses for the album's second half, the squirming and psychotically dissonant final moments of the closer beautifully reignite the album's transcendently disturbing brilliance.

[Touch](#)

There are three different pieces on this album, recorded at three different times and in three different places. Two of the three pieces were improvised live performances and one is a film score, which I suppose makes Paul's Touch debut more of a collection of orphaned pieces than a proper album. The unifying theme seems to be that all of these pieces diverge significantly from the aesthetic terrain of Paul's Poppy Nogood project (which also explains why he chose to use his own name for this release). That said, it would be more accurate to view *A Meditation on Discord* solely as a document of Paul's incandescent and darkly rapturous performance at the 2018 Desert Days festival with a couple of solid bonus tracks thrown in to flesh it out a bit.

Armed with just an open-tuned violin (G-D-G-D) and a small battery of effects pedals, Paul slowly and seamlessly constructed a complexly layered and endlessly transforming 30-minute tour de force in "Premonition." Naturally, the piece's hellishly explosive crescendo inspires the most awe, yet the greater achievement lies in how elegantly and fluidly Paul is able to make the slow journey from the lushly undulating drones of the opening to its ultimate destination (which resembles a deafening and bloodthirsty plague of demonic locusts). Every single one of the

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movements in "Premonition" could easily have been expanded into an excellent piece of its own, as even the gentlest, simplest drone passages are enlivened with unusually buzzing textures, vibrant harmonies, and an enveloping warmth. It only gets better from there, as that shimmering landscape blossoms into a vivid fantasia of fluttering, shivering strings and swelling chords. It is a sublimely gorgeous piece until it isn't: almost imperceptibly, Paul starts curdling everything until it becomes an infernal, and gnarled grotesquerie of itself. By the end, the piece has seamlessly become a complexly layered masterpiece of pure screeching, squirming, and sickly cacophony, and it is absolutely glorious.

I feel truly sorry for the hapless act that had to take the stage after Paul, but a worthy successor eventually materialized in the form of an intense lightning storm that stopped the show later that night. Amusingly, even Zachary Paul himself has a tough time following the bracing intensity of that performance, as "Premonition" is followed here by the gently languorous drones of "Slow Ascent." Unlike its predecessor, "Slow Ascent" does not sneakily evolve into anything deeper, as Paul contents himself with lingering in a dreamlike state of suspended animation. Given the context, however, that makes a lot of sense, as it was improvised as part of a guided meditation event in Los Angeles. Even at his most pastoral though, Paul finds a way to make his work feel fresh and distinctive, as unexpectedly sharp harmonics squeal and twinkle amidst the heavenly soft-focus languor. The album's final piece, "A Person With Feelings," is quite a bit different from the others, however, as it was composed for a currently unreleased short film. Initially, its departures from more conventional film score fare are quite subtle (mostly strange, passing dissonances), but the bottom drops out around the halfway point, and the piece becomes a sci-fi nightmare of throbbing machinery, crackling electronics, and sickly, hallucinatory jammers and squiggles (all conjured from a violin, no doubt). That mindfuckery proves to be just the prelude to the main course though, as it gives way to a truly demented crescendo of nightmarishly skittering and gibbering lunacy that would not be out of place on one of Rashad Becker's *Notional Species* albums.

After hearing *Discord*, I went back to investigate some of Paul's work as Poppy Nogood and was somewhat surprised to find little hint of the darkness and intensity that was to come. That project lies at the curious intersection where warmly pastoral drone, subtly experimental neo-classical music a la Sean McCann, and melancholy film score overlap. Occasionally there is some bite, but the impact is blunted quite a bit by the more composed and produced aesthetic. It is likable in its own way at times, yet it is nowhere near as memorable as the work captured here. "Premonition" is a fearless, raw, and completely undiluted work where Paul's vision is directly executed with wild-eyed intensity. It is not *entirely* raw, as the recording is clean and crowd-noise free, but none of the rough edges have been sanded away by production, and there is no homogenizing, fleshed-out arrangement to diffuse its focus. It is a simple, direct, and dazzling high-wire act that Paul pulls off with astonishing virtuosity and power. I am curious to see if Paul ever revisits this vein again or if this release captures the one perfect and glorious night in which he was unquestionably the Niccolò Paganini of loop architecture. The former would certainly be wonderful, but

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captures one hell of a memorable performance either way.

Samples can be found [here](#) .