

Brainwashed - Midwife, "Forever"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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It is fair to say that every Midwife release is a deeply personal one, as Madeline Johnston has never been one to mask her true feelings with ambiguously poetic language or aesthetic distance. This second full-length is an especially heavy one though, as it was composed as a sort of letter to Johnston's late friend Colin Ward (the two were roommates at Denver's beloved former DIY art space Rhinocerosopolis). Fortunately, cathartically transforming dark emotions into powerful art has always been where Johnston shines the brightest and that remains as true as ever with *Forever*. In fact, she has arguably only gotten better, as *Forever's* lead single "Anyone Can Play Guitar" actually gave me chills the first time I heard it. Thankfully, the other five songs do not pack quite as much of an emotional gut punch, making this album considerably more well-suited for repeat listening than, say, Mount Eerie's similarly inspired (and emotionally devastating)

A Crow Looked at Me

. There is certainly plenty of pain and anger to be found on

Forever

, but that darkness is beautifully mingled with warmth, hopefulness, and a characteristically unerring instinct for great songcraft.

[The Flenser](#)

Given how this year is shaping up thus far, the sentiment of the opening "2018" unintentionally feels even more apt for the present, as the lyrical content boils down to just "This is really happening to me" and "Get the fuck away from me, 2018." For Johnston and many other Denver artists, however, that year will always be remembered as the year of Ward's untimely passing, which was arguably the culminating event for quite a demoralizing couple of years (Denver shut down Rhinocerosopolis in 2016 in the wake of the Ghost Ship fire). Despite the justifiably hostile lyrics, however, "2018" is an eerily lovely piece, as the repeating lyrics are warmly hiss-soaked and feel almost like a mantra. And, of course, the underlying music is quite beautiful as well, unfolding as an understated, slow-motion dreamscape of chiming arpeggios and reverberating slashes of distorted chords. By comparison, the more driving and hook-filled "Anyone Can Play Guitar" feels like a bittersweet breakthrough to a much later stage of grief, as Johnston notes that anyone can tell a lie, fall in love, or say goodbye, then breaks into a simultaneously haunting and defiant chorus of "You can't run for your whole life." That said, the chorus later transforms into the much darker sentiment of "I'm not coming back this time." As

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dark as it is, however, "Anyone Can Play Guitar" is an absolutely mesmerizing pop song that is equal parts seething, mysterious, and gorgeous. Johnston is a master at making a few simple lines feel increasingly fraught with deeper meaning as they repeat again and again in shifting order. Similarly, she has a real instinct for vocal effects and harmonies, masterfully using distortion and hiss to actually *increase* the sense of intimacy and rawness. Throughout the entire album, Johnston's confessional-sounding vocals consistently find the perfect blurry middle ground between sharp-edged and sensuously breathy.

The following instrumental ("Vow") briefly dials down the simmering intensity of the album, as it is essentially just a quietly lovely progression of chords allowed to linger until they decay into near-silence. Notably, however, that interlude acts as a bridge between the album's two distinct halves, as the remaining songs are considerably brighter in tone. The first of that trio ("Language") is a warmly tender elegy that almost feels like a love song. It also features the first real splash of color on the album, as Johnston enhances her characteristic slow-motion arpeggios with a squirming, shivering, and shimmering motif that sounds like a swirl of backwards guitars. After that, the album gives way to a second divergent interlude: this time, a poignant spoken word recording by Ward himself entitled "C.R.F.W." I am a little surprised that Johnston did not make that the final piece on the album, as both the voice of Ward himself and the moving final line would have made a perfect and poetic ending for the album (and it dissolves into a quite a heavenly wake of quavering drones as well). The ending that Johnston chose instead is quite strong too though, as she stomps her distortion pedal and launches into a fuzzed-out gem of shoegaze-y pop bliss ("S.W.I.M."). In fact, that may even be a more perfect ending, as its comparatively muscular, bright, and hopeful tone suggests that Johnston emerged from that dark stretch unbroken and even stronger than before. Moreover, it is the piece where Midwife most sounds like a full band, showing that the collaborative community spirit of Rhinocerosopolis lives on through Johnston and her quartet of guest musicians (Tucker Theodore, Randall Taylor, Jensen Keller & Caden Marches).

If *Forever* was an album by almost any other artist, I would probably be disappointed that there are only four fully formed songs, but one aspect of Johnston's artistry that I genuinely love is her singular talent for distillation. It is not an exaggeration to say that the entirety of *Forever*'s

lyrics could easily fit on a (very small) napkin, but that beautifully illustrates the minimalist genius of Johnston's approach to both language and songcraft. While every song on *Forever*

seems like it was created solely to convey one single important thought or feeling, the full meaning of Johnston's words is left teasingly elusive through fragmented repetition...until a crucial phrase is finally allowed to complete at the song's end. And the song DOES end at that point, as there is no point in lingering around once the message has been delivered. Every single word is chosen for maximum impact and anything that could shift focus away from that impact has been mercilessly carved away. And on a larger scale, the cumulative arc of these six pieces was clearly designed to pack an undiluted emotion punch (and it succeeds). In fact, I am tempted to compare

Forever

to a perfectly cut diamond, but that is exactly the wrong metaphor, as the beauty of Midwife is that Johnston's songs feel wonderfully raw, direct, and deeply human rather than polished or

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overwrought: these are great songs and this is great art. Admittedly, it is hard to say if this album quite tops the absolutely stellar

Prayer Hands

EP (we may have a tie), but it is very easy to say with complete confidence that Midwife has had an unbroken hot streak since the moment the project debuted. While I know it is only April right now,

Forever

is unquestionably one of the most focused and powerful albums that anyone will release this year.

Samples can be found [here](#) .