

Brainwashed - Sky Furrows

Written by Creag Dunton

Sunday, 18 October 2020 09:37 - Last Updated Sunday, 18 October 2020 18:46



As a four piece from the Albany, New York region consisting of some of the most well known members of the small, but dedicated noise/psych scene, Sky Furrows is a project that is seemingly from another time that belies the band's avant garde tendencies. Rather than blending disparate genres or delving into deep electronic improvisations, the album is a concise, somewhat predictable one, but that in no means an insult. Instead this self-titled album is almost like a time capsule uncovered from some three decades past, and one that beautifully encapsulates a sound and a scene that was all too brief.

[Skell Recordings/Tape Drift Records/Philthy Rex Records](#)

By a past era, I specifically mean the mid to late 1980s, where post-punk transitioned to "college rock" but before grunge and punk revivalism overwhelmed the genre. Given the fact that the members of Sky Furrows were active musicians of that generation (although not necessarily aware of each other at the time) rather than young people seeking to emulate a past they did not exist in. For this reason especially, the album has a sincerity and authenticity that only people who were "there" would be able to capture.

Lead by author/poet/music critic Karen Schoemer's spoken word narratives, the other three members (drummer Phil Donnelly, guitarist Mike Griffin, and bassist Eric Hardiman) are all members of Albany's long running psych rock collective Burnt Hills as well. Griffin and Hardiman are also active in more experimental guises: Parashi for the former, and the latter as Century Plants and Rambutan (both also have also been frequent collaborators with John Olson in recent years). Schoemer's delivery fits the largely personal lyrical content well, with a dry yet not disconnected intonation as she presents detailed vignettes of life, ironically are timeless enough in their references that they could have been from 1986 or today. Both her writing and her delivery contain just enough self-awareness to never cross that threshold into "serious artist" pretension but still have the right amount of gravity to showcase what a brilliant writer she is.

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The improvisational side of the band is not necessarily on display here, but it does not need to be. While Schoemer's narratives are at the center of the album, the music never comes across as sounding like just a backing band, nor does it ever take the spotlight away from the spoken word: it always remains in perfect balance. Right from the onset of "Alyosha" the groundwork is laid clear: Griffin's slightly twangy guitar over Donnelly's tight, light touch drumming and Hardiman's rich bass. Shifting between subtle accompaniments to heavy outbursts, the flow is perfect.

Shifting tempos and dynamics also keep things diverse in the concluding "Foreign Cities," ensuring it's nine-plus minute duration never drags for a moment. There is a bit more consistency within the shorter songs, however. "36 Ways of Looking at a Memory" is all fuzzy guitar leads and late 1980s modern rock sounds that resemble a multitude of artists but only by inspiration instead of imitation. "The Mind Runs a Race and Falls Down" is a more uptempo excursion, punctuating the spoken word elements with heavier melodic passages. The album's centerpiece comes early in the form of the 15 minute "Ensenada." Here the psych essence of Burnt Hills comes a bit more to the forefront, with Donnelly and Hardiman laying down a rhythm section that manages to balance the mechanical repetition of krautrock with just a hint of jazz looseness. Griffin's guitar echoes and squalls out with less restraint, catching delays or the occasional passage of feedback, but in no way seeming random or self-indulgent.

When I say that Sky Furrows are not breaking any new ground on their debut, it is in no way meant to be demeaning, because that was not their intent. Instead it feels like the proverbial lost record of a band that just got to the edge of the popularity they deserved but were held back. Or one of the rare brilliant private press albums that no one has ever heard of, but is discussed with a holy grail-like reverence amongst record collectors. The authenticity is not just in the sound, but also in the approach: as previously stated, this a band who were active in these various scenes across the country before. Sky Furrows is not a band capitalizing on someone else's history: this is entirely their own.

[Samples Available Here.](#)