

Brainwashed - The Dead C, "Unknowns"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Unknowns

In recent years, it seems like each new Dead C release is inspired by a different extreme self-imposed constraint or contrarian impulse for self-sabotage. Obviously, the trio have always been unwaveringly devoted to making challenging and polarizing art, but they are also admirably devoted to continual reinvention (and presumably to repeatedly wrong-footing their audience as well). This latest EP is a bit of a puzzle though, as it feels less like the product of a focused overarching vision than it does an eclectic mixed bag of varying threads ("broken, shambolic blues" and "gnarled guitar tone worship" spring most immediately to mind). Some of the trio's searching forays into uncharted territory on *Unknowns* definitely yield more compelling results than others though, so longtime fans will likely find something to love even if the entire EP can be tough to fully embrace. Given that,

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would not be an ideal starting point for the curious, as the band seem to be consciously not playing to their strengths, but they are at least doing things wrong in some very interesting ways.

[Ba Da Bing!](#)

The Dead C belong to a highly exclusive pantheon of artists that I genuinely love, yet who also seem like they could plausibly be an extremely elaborate performance art prank at my expense.

I bring that up because the initial appearance of vocals in the opening "Grunt Machine" immediately called to mind the infamous outtakes of Orson Wells' wine commercial (a rare and intoxicating blend of "surprised" and "distracted"). The slurred, mumbled, and unfocused vocals on *Unknowns* are sometimes what I would charitably call "an interesting choice" at times, yet I can also see the possible purpose behind such an approach: the band are not halfheartedly composing messy, elliptical, and inscrutable songs, but are instead adding a bit of buried, enigmatic poetry to their limping and burned-out rock deconstructions. At the center of all the noise, a mumbled koan awaits! Vocals aside, "Grunt Machine" is also significant for being the EP's sole foray into the aforementioned "broken, shambolic blues" due to Robbie Yates' slow, shuffle rhythm, but the grimy snarls of feedback and groaning distortion that Bruce Russell and Michael Morley unleash approach "peak-Dead C" territory (despite their brevity). The song's structure is actually far weirder than my description suggests though, as the "blues vamp" portion feels like it simply erupts in the middle of a second and completely different song. That other theme then returns at the end for a meditative outro of sleepily chugging chords and

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blown-out, spacy guitar noise. That disrupted compositional structure may be another "interesting choice," I suppose, but I like it anyway, as the piece's obvious linear path (building towards a fiery guitar crescendo) would have been a predictable and well-traveled one. This path is neither.

Two of my favorite pieces follow next: "Still" and "The Sky Above." On "Still," moaned and mumbled vocals float over a buzzing, clattering, and noisy backdrop and everything initially seems like business-as-usual for the trio, but then everything suddenly falls away to leave only a cool drum pattern and a lovely, shimmering haze of guitar noise. "The Sky Above," on the other hand, feels like an actual structured and composed song, albeit one crafted from a hyper-minimal palette of drums, vocals, and quiet, murky smears of guitar. Around the halfway point, however, it is disrupted by a jarring blurt of noise and the piece then dissolves into a slow fade-out of amp noise, blown-out snarls of feedback, and quivering drones. The EP's final two pieces are the longest. The first, "Glitterness," leads with an impressive squall of stammering, wah-wah-ravaged noise, but soon transforms into a crawling groove centered around slow washes of ringing guitar chords. By Dead C standards, that second part is a refreshingly simple and ugliness-free curveball, but I wish it was not the piece's endpoint. If the order of the two sections was reversed, the dynamic arc would probably be more satisfying, but I also suspect that is why the band chose the opposite route instead. The closer is another gem, however, as "The Field" initially combines a heartbeat-like kick drum with a meandering replay of the album's earlier themes, then abruptly changes into something else entirely with a cymbal flourish. That "something else" turns out to be a fully formed song of sorts and quite a good one at that, as Yates' weirdly slow-motion/double-time beat drags along an increasingly dense cacophony of burned-out soloing and smoldering distortion. Appropriately, the EP ends as a smoking ruin.

For the most part, I quite like *Unknowns*, but there are admittedly some caveats with it. For one, it passes by too quickly to leave a deep impression and none of these five songs rank among the band's most memorable. One killer centerpiece would have definitely elevated this EP into something more significant. That said, it is not like the Dead C were desperately trying to write immortal songs and failed. Instead, it captures the trio gleefully breaking things and mischievously toying with expectations with complete assurance. When viewed as simply as a "this is what we are currently doing" dispatch between major statements,

Unknowns

holds up quite well and reveals some compelling new developments in the band's sound.

Naturally, I was drawn to this EP primarily because The Dead C have long been among of the most reliably fascinating purveyors of guitar noise around and

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not only keeps that trend going, but fitfully takes it to some wonderful and unexpected new heights. That last part is

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' real and lasting appeal for me, as Bruce Russell and Michael Morley have truly mastered the intricacies of crafting wonderfully ugly tones and giving them the space to breath and smear together into gently oscillating, slow-burning magic. Even if

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is not quite a sustained triumph, it still amounts to a very enjoyable collection of inspired moments.

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Samples can be found [here](#) .