

## Brainwashed - Ana Roxanne, "Because of a Flower"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Ana Roxanne's cryptically titled debut mini-LP was one of 2019's most pleasant surprises, as she masterfully wielded a minimal palette of hazy vocals, subtle instrumentation, and field recordings to construct a suite of songs that felt both remarkably intimate and completely untethered to conventional structure or contemporary trends. In fact, I suspect I could have been easily convinced that ~~~ was a highly coveted private press obscurity from the early '80s. This latest release (her first for Kranky) takes a somewhat different direction in some ways, but thankfully remains every bit as beguiling as its predecessor: the field recordings may be less prominent and Roxanne's previous impressionistic, amorphous structures have been largely replaced with more conventional shapes, yet the hooks are now stronger and the songs more memorable. That feels like a perfectly acceptable trade-off in my book. While I am historically dismayed when artists that that I enjoy move further away from the idiosyncrasies that made their early work so special, Roxanne proves herself to be the rare exception to that trend, as the best moments of *Because of a Flower* take the warmth and melodicism of

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to some truly beautiful new heights.

### [Kranky](#)

I was both surprised and disoriented to learn that Roxanne apparently spent five years working on *Because of a Flower*, as it feels like a significant evolution from ~~~, yet it is entirely possible that some of these pieces were composed at the same time as her debut (or possibly even earlier). In a conceptual sense, however, it makes perfect sense that Roxanne may have been working on two noticeably divergent releases at once, as the two feel a lot like different chapters in the same abstract memoir. On

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, Ana's soundscapes seemed primarily inspired by warm feelings of nostalgia for her family and childhood.

*Because of a Flower*

, on the other hand, seems to be more thematically focused upon her intersex identity (and the more recent stages of her life). It would probably be extremely easy for a casual listener to miss that though, as she has an intuitive genius for incorporating those themes in subtle and oblique ways that enable her work to feel artistically honest and deeply personal, yet also resonate on a

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universal human level. For the most part, the album's more personal themes manifest themselves in repurposed textbook passages, "cinematic dialogue samples and castrati aria allusions." It was admittedly a bit of a surprise to hear found sounds borrowed from movies rather than the natural world, but she invariably makes very effective use of them (the endearing "tropical beach" ambiance of

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does happily resurface on the album's final two songs though). As enjoyable and evocative as Roxanne's choice of samples can be, however, the heart of this album is unquestionably the blarily gorgeous vocals that float languorously over dreamlike drones or melodic bass lines.

For me, the centerpiece of the album is the slow and sensuous "Camille," as Ana's voice soulfully coos and swoons over a backdrop of warm organ chords and an R&B-inspired drum machine groove. There are also some snatches of film dialogue thrown into the mix, which nicely enhances an already wonderful piece by adding a sharper and more unpredictable textural layer. While I tend to think of her work as vaguely "ambient" in nature, the addition of a beat suits her aesthetic extremely well. I suspect she would have a bright future as an arty outsider R&B artist if she wanted that. That said, her aesthetic works just fine without a beat as well, so there is no shortage of other highlights and they head in some unexpectedly varied directions. For one, "A Study in Vastness" is absolutely sublime, resembling a ghostly, deconstructed Enya with some dark and moody undertones lurking within its fog of blurred drones. "Suite Pour L'invisible," on the other hand, is a bit more representative of the album's overarching aesthetic, as it is built from a warmly melodic and ringing bass motif enhanced by quietly twinkling guitar arpeggios. Musically, it calls to mind a classic 4AD sound akin to This Mortal Coil, but Roxanne's strain of Romanticism feels too simple, intimate, and spontaneous to warrant close comparisons to anyone else: she might be exploring similar moods and using similar instrumentation, but the casual naturalness of her vocals make almost everything she records sound uniquely her own. That makes sense, given her working method of "beginning with 'a drone element and a mood,' then intuiting melody, syllables, and lyrics incrementally, like sacred shapes materializing from mist." Her work has the effortless charm of an artist who is so full of life and so comfortable with singing that it is hard to imagine her ever making a vocal decision that does make a song instantly better (presumably because she has reached an entirely post-decision plane of pure instinct).

I would be remiss if I did not also single out the divergent instrumental "---" as another gem, as it unfolds as a gently pulsing and dreamlike reverie of burbling electric piano that organically shapeshifts into fresh tendrils of melody. The remaining three pieces are certainly likable as well, but they are a bit more atmospheric in tone, arguably functioning more as integral parts of the album's overall arc than as individual highlights. I am tempted to describe *Because of a Flower* as

Roxanne's "singles album" and

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as its more abstract and New Age-inspired counterpart and that would not be an objectively misleading characterization. However, each has at least one piece that muddies the waters enough to elude such easy generalizations. On

*Flower*

, it is the songs that begin and end the album that feel like the connective tissue linking it

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thematically and compositionally with its predecessor. Between those two poles, however, lies quite a wonderful four-song streak that feels like something new. A small part of me admittedly wishes that there were more "songs" as tightly crafted and rhythmic as "Camille," but I suspect that is just the lingering part of me that craves familiarity. That part of me needs to shut the hell up, as Roxanne has done a superb job of carving out her own quiet niche in an oft-overwhelming cultural landscape and

*Because of a Flower*

is a lovely and beautifully crafted album. As an absorbing and thoughtfully sequenced whole, I suppose it surpasses the more uneven

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, but the two albums feel enough like complementary halves of the same vision that choosing a favorite feels like missing the point entirely.

Samples can be found [here](#) .