

Brainwashed - Severed Heads, "Since the Accident"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Severed Heads' bizarre 1983 album has led one of the most improbable and ridiculous lives that an album could possibly hope to live. Although it began as a self-released cassette of absurd and unapologetically experimental tape loop collages, a fluke surge of interest in the Australian post-punk scene resulted in a major label record deal, an international tour, and the most unlikely of hit songs. The rest of the story is even stranger still.

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Severed Heads musical output has essentially been Tom Ellard's solo project since 1985, but the band was originally formed in 1979 by Richard Fielding and Andrew Wright as Mr. And Mrs. No Smoking Sign (a name chosen for being deliberately stupid, unwieldy, and uncool-sounding). Ellard joined later that year and the band changed their name to Severed Heads for similarly perverse reasons (they thought it would be funny for a trio of beachside suburb-dwelling Australians to get lumped in with scary British industrialists). Then Wright quit because the band wasn't headed in a musical enough direction and Fielding left a little bit later because the band was becoming far too musical (he did not like the idea of "songs"). Both founding members gone, Tom was left alone with a revolving cast of doomed new members

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(and a band name that he never liked). Amusingly, Fielding later went on to start a band with no human members, just equipment that was set-up to play by itself. It's unfortunate that he did not become more famous, as I suspect his story might be even more fascinating than Ellard's.

While Tom retained the passion for tape loops that was the core of the early Severed Heads' sound, *Since the Accident* marked the first appearances of the electro pop elements that would later come to define the band in future years (for better or worse). The most overtly melodic piece on the album is "Dead Eyes Opened," a bouncy synthesizer confection that made the Australian charts upon its release and ultimately became a big hit when it was remixed in 1994. Ironically, Ellard has publicly dismissed the song as "insipid" and only included it on the original Terse Tapes release because he needed some filler to avoid leaving blank space on the cassette. Alleged insipidness aside, it's still a very fun and catchy song. Also, scoring a hit with a song that is built around a white noise solo and a British journalist talking about a mutilated corpse is a pretty amazing accomplishment.

The rest of the album, of course, sounds nothing like "Dead Eyes Opened." There are a few other pieces that make the leap from "sound experiment" to "song," but melodies are usually in short supply. They aren't entirely absent though: "A Million Angels," one of the album's clear highlights, marries a heavenly choral snippet to an endearingly plodding proto-industrial dance beat (and even features an actual chord progression). "Exploring the Secrets of Treating Deaf Mutes" is another great foray into eccentric electro pop, though it unexpectedly features some very intense vocals (presumably not by Ellard). It is a lot more conventionally melodic and songlike than anything else here, but it was inspired by a Maoist-era pamphlet on acupuncture and features a bridge that sounds like an out of control tape reel or a broken short-wave radio, so it is still pretty bizarre by normal standards.

The remainder of the pieces are mostly tape collages and they are fascinating in their own right. I'd be hard-pressed to describe *Since the Accident* as a great album, but it is certainly a very charismatic and inspired one—mischief and wonder clearly seem to be its sole guiding motivations. While most of the tape experiments roughly follow a template of increasingly dense, tensely repeating loops, the source material is quite varied, wild and imaginative. At this point in their career, the band had absolutely zero hope for success: they were just some friends making the craziest music they could in a sparsely populated country that didn't have the slightest interest in what they were doing. Consequently, everything was fair game: recordings of Sylvia Plath, Jerry Lewis, howling dingoes, jet engines, nature documentaries, televangelists, snippets of old soul songs, and much, much more are cut-up, slowed-down, sped-up, reversed, and decontextualized into a deranged cacophony. In retrospect, Severed Heads had a lot in common with their US contemporaries Negativland, but without any narrative or political end in mind, just a fascination with pure sound and stuttering, disorienting juxtapositions.

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Since its Nettwerk reissue in 1989, *Since the Accident* has always been paired with a scattering of tracks from its predecessor: the legendary

Blubberknife

cassette. Musically,

Blubberknife

treads quite similar territory to

Accident

, but rarely embellishes its insistently repetitive tape loop pile-ups with beats, vocals, or instruments (aside from "Adolph A Carrot"). While surreal and perversely hypnotic at times,

Blubberknife's

privileged status in Severed Heads history is due primarily to the fact that it was originally packaged in a shrink-wrapped assemblage of old television parts. Its limited run sold very well, but the packaging was so successful as a bizarre art object that many people never bothered to open it to get to the actual cassette (much to Ellard's bemused consternation).

The current version of this album has the added bonus of featuring reproductions of the locked grooves that first appeared on the 1984 reissue by Virgin Australia, one of which actually *began* the second side of the album. It is very hard not to love a band that tried so diligently to annoy and alienate the hapless record label that tried to give them their first taste of success.

(Note- I have the 1989 Nettwerk version of the album. The content and sequencing vary quite a bit between different versions.)

Samples:

- [Dead Eyes Opened](#)
- [A Million Angels](#)
- [Alaskan Polar Bear Heater](#)