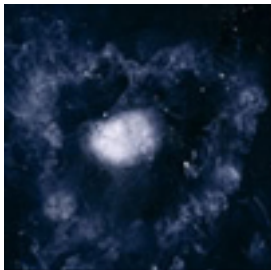


Brainwashed - Swans, "My Father Will Guide Me Up a Rope to the Sky"

Written by John Kealy

Sunday, 19 September 2010 18:46 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 September 2010 23:21



Swans were dead, but Michael Gira is emphatic that this is not a reunion or a re-hash of a defunct brand. The Angels of Light were a rebirth (the title *New Mother* emphasizes that), but they have run their course as an outlet for Gira's music. They represented a different sentiment and a different focus and this album is very much back where Swans left off in terms of feeling. That is not to say that his time spent doing The Angels of Light has not rubbed off on Gira but this feels right as a Swans album. Not only that but it feels like one of the definitive albums of the year, there is nothing here I would remove or alter.

[Young God](#)

Image

Most of the songs on *My Father Will Guide Me Up a Rope to the Sky* were previously released as solo acoustic versions on the album

I Am Not Insane

(although "My Birth" dates back to the last Swans tour in 1997) so, for better or for worse, many fans will already be familiar with the material before they press play. While lyrically I knew what to expect, it was hard for me to envisage how those acoustic versions would translate to the full sound that Swans are legendary for. I find that when Gira picks up an acoustic guitar, no matter what song he plays it could very easily end up going in any number of directions once a group gets involved. However, from the moment "No Words/No Thoughts" begins, it is impossible to deny the intention behind this release. The cynics who are dismissing this as a cash grab by Gira could not be further from the truth. Had this album been released in the late '90s, no one would have been surprised at the band's name (though the music might have been more of a surprise).

The only song on *I Am Not Insane* to sound instantly like a Swans song was "Eden Prison" and I am delighted to find it present here fully developed. The distinctive rhythm could easily have evolved from earlier Swans pieces like "Feel Happiness" from

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Swans Are Dead

or "I Am the Sun" from

The Great Annihilator

. It is hard to put a finger on what makes a Swans song and I feel the usual descriptions of heavy, slow and miserable to be not entirely persuasive. For me, Swans have always been about the rhythm: the songs lurch rather than follow a steady 1, 2, 3, 4 beat. Whether it is a quiet, introspective piece or one of those pummelling early works, it is all in the rhythm and that particular rhythm is all over this album. "Eden Prison" churns like a powerful engine; the pistons firing, driving the group like a runaway, overladen train doing its best to stay on the tracks.

"Inside Madeline" totters on a knife edge as a snaking bass line care of Chris Pravdica (his first tour of duty with Swans) worms in and out of the layers of guitar and Thor Harris' fantastic drumming. I was a little disappointed that Toby Dammit (a.k.a. Larry Mullins) was not involved again but Harris' confident and commanding drumming (amongst other duties) is well up to scratch. Swans' sense of dynamics proves to be still intact as "Inside Madeline" drops to a whisper to allow Gira to inject his words into the music. Gira steps back from the microphone on "You Fucking People Make Me Sick" to allow his daughter Saoirse and Devendra Banhart to carry the vocals. Banhart has made a career out of capturing his childhood spirit but here his voice sounds ragged and ancient, especially so when Saoirse's joins his. Midway through the song, the mood changes drastically as clusters of notes are dragged out of a piano like a difficult birth.

There is a deluxe version of the album which unfortunately was not made available to those who pre-ordered the album back in January. Even an option to upgrade would have been appreciated as the piece is every bit as good as the main event and it sucks to have to buy a second copy of the album to get it. Yet it is easy to overlook this as "Look At Me Go" has a gravity which allows it stand alone from *My Father Will Guide Me Up a Rope to the Sky*, it is not a bonus disc in anything other than name. A collage in the style of The Body Lovers/Body Haters albums, "Look At Me Go" takes the raw recordings from the *My Father Will Guide Me Up a Rope to Sky* sessions and sends them into a vortex. Some of the sounds are obviously out-takes from the album (such as Saoirse Gira's full vocals for "You Fucking People Make Me Sick") and it is interesting to hear some of the segments that did not make the album, the what-could-have-beens and the familiar hammered into new shapes.

I have rated all of Gira's post-Swans work highly, usually more highly than much of the Swans catalogue (The Angels of Light were Gira's true calling) but *My Father Will Guide Me Up a Rope to Sky* is even better than I could hope for. The music remains vital and powerful, the idea of this as a "reunion" does not

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sully the work put in by these musicians.

Swans are alive.

samples:

- [Jim](#)
- [Inside Madeline](#)
- [Look At Me Go](#)