

Brainwashed - Charalambides, "Exile"

Written by Stephen Bush

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Twenty years into Tom and Christina Carter's rich partnership, it has become next to impossible to identify outside reference points in their work. Charalambides exists in its own universe—insular, curtains drawn. *Exile*, their first release in four years, begins with "Autumn Leaves," a wordless prelude of Tom's austere guitar playing, setting the tone for the band's most laser-focused album since 2004's *Joy Shapes*.

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Exile is a stunning album, one of Tom and Christina's best in a deep discography filled with contenders. It is also their most sparse, repetitive, and lyrically heavy work in recent memory. Themes of death and loss abound, from the suggestive song titles—"Desecrated," "Before You Go," "Into the Earth"—down to Christina's seemingly stream-of-consciousness lyrics. Just a few minutes into the album, on "Desecrated," she intones, "I am not on the side of the living," sounding exasperated, broken. Later on, she abstractly dances around what sounds like someone's passing: "She had to calm herself down / by becoming more ill / by becoming lethargic, one might say / by becoming extremely immovable." Perhaps in denial, she reassures herself, offering up an explanation for the inevitable: "It's hard to get good help these days."

Like much of Charalambides' work, *Exile* truly shines when its songs sprawl out, disregarding any notions of acceptable length. "Words Inside" is a prime example, based around a reverberating guitar line that repeats for 15 minutes, steady as a clock's hand, while Tom wails on his guitar over the top. As usual, Tom plays a sort of snarly, fractured blues, uniquely his own—at first controlled, then less predictable—nearly flying off the rails by the song's finale. Christina's words are mostly unintelligible, except for in brief flashes: "Touching / touch deep inside / the words inside / alone." This is dark, heady stuff, packed with improvised repetition, designed for total surrender and concentration—not easy listening, even by Charalambides' previous standards.

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Christina's words aren't any lighter on side B, but at times, Tom's improvisational, snaky melodies become a touch less assertive. When he picks individual notes, they are sparse, muted. "Wanted to Talk" does away with all excess instrumentation, with Tom playing a simple, six-note figure on acoustic guitar *ad infinitum*, while Christina confesses to herself, "I've tried so many things tonight / but I didn't try to talk / I didn't try / and now it's time to say goodnight." Not every song remains so hushed: "Before You Go" nosedives into a stormy drone of guitar feedback and harmonics—an approach Tom hinted at with the warm, enveloping drone of "Desecrated" a few songs earlier. Here, though, an oppressive wall of feedback creeps forward into the mix like a rising tide, swallowing up Christina's voice until all that remains is a ghostly echo: "Before you go... before you go."

"Into the Earth" is *Exile's* centerpiece, functioning as a monumental showcase for Christina's voice. Finally at peace with her sense of loss, which she seemed to deal with earlier through a sense of detachment, Christina accepts the reality at hand: "And you have to go inside / into the earth, into the earth." A few minutes in, Tom's brilliant guitar playing takes over when Christina can seemingly no longer find words, echoing her vocal melody in counterpoint. It's a heart-stopping moment, one of the most beautiful and moving in Charalambides' body of work, and—dare I say it—the best 12 minutes of music I have heard all year.

Closer "Pity Pity Me" settles into what initially seems like a quarter-hour of piano, tape hiss and uncomfortable silence. Christina sings in an uncomfortably high, strained register (think PJ Harvey's *White Chalk*): "Pity pity me / pity me, I say / pity me, my darling / carry me away." Before the song fades, Tom launches into a storm of gritty, heavy feedback and left-field blues picking. It's a strong end to a very strong contender for the year's best album, from one of the most consistent groups of the last 20 years. *Exile* is essential listening for anyone with a taste for creative, challenging music that rewards repeated spins and complete immersion.

Samples:

- [Words Inside](#)
- [Before You Go](#)
- [Into the Earth](#)