

## Brainwashed - Kaboom Karavan, "Hokus Fokus"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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For some reason, my favorite albums always seem to be those that come from unexpected places, a trend that delightfully continues with this third effort by Belgium's Bram Bosteels. I was vaguely familiar with Bosteels already, but only because I had previously heard 2011's *Barr a Barra*

and casually dismissed it as "a bunch of murky soundscapes for obscure theater productions." After hearing this latest effort, however, I found myself desperately rummaging around my house in vain hope of finding and revisiting my long-forgotten copy of its predecessor.

*Hokus Fokus*

is absolutely deranged in the best possible way, resembling nothing less than an extremely disturbing carnival-themed nightmare. This is easily one of the strangest albums in recent memory.

### [Miasmah](#)

This is one of those rare albums that inadvertently opened up exciting new vistas of weirdness and lunacy for me, as I was completely unfamiliar with most of the artists that I have seen referenced as Bram's current kindred spirits (Gultskra Artikler and Anworth Kirk, for example). Calling anyone a kindred spirit to Bosteels at this point is a bit of a stretch though, as *Hokus Fokus*

finds him (mostly) abandoning his gloom-shrouded ambient past to plunge gleefully into sounding like a clown's bad acid trip. Or a zombie Django Reinhardt performing at the cantina on Tatooine. Or singing puppet show in hell. Or something else equally playfully perverse that no one else has ever considered pursuing.

Despite all that, *Hokus Fokus* is a surprisingly musical effort, in its own gloriously wrong way. The best pieces, such as "The A Theme," combine jaunty, jazzy guitar hooks with oddly lurching or clunky rhythms and a wonderfully wrong-footing periphery of inhuman gibbering and ghostly

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dissonance. That winning formula repeats itself again somewhat with "KipKap," which sounds a boatful of demonic Oompa-Loompas singing a work song as they drift along an underground river. The rest of the album does not quite replicate those levels of bizarrism (how could it?), but the "haunted carnival" feel of *Hokus Fokus* continually finds new and unexpected ways to surface as the album unfolds (noir-ish sax motifs, chattering incomprehensible voices, random honking, comically lumbering kitchen-sink percussion, etc.).

The final twist is that some parts of the album sound far more like dissonant modern classical than maniacal outsider art. This tendency is most prominent (and effective) in the opening "Kolik," as Bram creates a wonderfully nuanced and disquieting bed of string swells and woodwinds beneath a creepily squealing, exhaling, and echoing haze of non-musical sounds. Remarkably, Bram handled the bulk of the instrumentation himself this time around (*Barra Barra* was more of a collective effort), though a guest trumpet player turns up for one song. The fact that there is a crazy Belgian out there who can play just about anything, compose in wide-ranging and disparate styles, blend them all together into a unique and hallucinatory whole, and then happily sabotage it all with funny voices, kazoos, and an anarchic sense of humor makes me very, very happy.

My sole (minor) grievance with *Hokus Fokus* is that Bosteels' former dark ambient tendencies still sometimes tend to get the better of him, causing occasional lulls in the action. Those same tendencies also make even the most cheery passages sound delightfully warped, but the balance could be a bit more optimal. It seems silly to complain that such a massive, unexpected leap into bold new musical terrain falls short of being perfect though: I am now very much an enthusiastic fan of Bosteels and his deeply unsettling vision.

Samples:

- [Kolik](#)
- [KipKap](#)
- [The A Theme](#)