

Brainwashed - Chuck Johnson, "The Cinder Grove"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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I can think of few other artists in the midst of a hot streak quite as wonderful as the one Chuck Johnson is currently enjoying, as nearly everything he has released since 2017's *Balsams* has been downright revelatory. In keeping with that theme, his return to solo work is yet another sublime stunner and a strong contender for his finest album to date. While Johnson wisely does not depart much from his winning

Balsams

aesthetic, he does subtly expand his palette with some help from Sarah Davachi, a small string ensemble, and an endearingly exacting approach to reverb. For the most part, however, everything beyond his swooningly gorgeous pedal steel playing is merely icing on an already perfect cake: virtually no one crafts warm, achingly beautiful soundscapes better than Chuck Johnson and he seems to only get better at it with each new release.

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The album opens with an absolute masterpiece in the form of "Raz-de-Marée," which poignantly combines a lovely descending organ theme with a lazily shimmering haze of pedal steel heaven. Everything about it is damn near perfect, from the melodies to the textures right down to the bittersweetly beautiful mood. It is frankly an impossible act to follow, which makes the more vaporous "Serotiny" pale a bit by comparison, though its floating dreamscape is still a very pleasant place to linger. The strongest pieces tend to be the ones that anchor the sliding, liquid bliss of the pedal steel with something more solid though, as the instrument can start to feel a bit weightless on its own. On "Constellation," that solidity is initially provided by a repeating pattern of warm bass tones, but the structure eventually gets fleshed out further by some reverberant piano chords courtesy of Davachi. The following "Red Branch Bell" is the album's most adventurous and unexpected delight, as Johnson fades into the background while a churning string theme steadily builds in visceral intensity, then reappears to finish the piece with a languorously psychedelic coda. The closing "The Laurel" feels similarly epic, marrying an elegiac string motif with some achingly beautiful pedal steel that evokes vivid streaks of color in a slow-motion sunset—a fittingly great end to a near-perfect album. Johnson hits the mark on

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nearly every possible detail with *The Cinder Grove*, but my favorite facet (aside from the songs themselves) is just how incredibly wonderful it all

sounds

, especially the way the sharper textures of the strings tear through the soft-focus swirl of dreamily sliding melodies. This album is going to be in heavy rotation here for a long time.

Samples can be found [here](#) .