

Brainwashed - Radian, "On Dark Silent Off"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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It has been seven years since these Viennese avant-rock deconstructionists last surfaced with a proper full-length release, so I was not quite sure what to expect with this album, particularly since my interest in the "post-rock" milieu has since dwindled to almost zero. Also, aside from a one-off collaboration with Giant Sand's Howe Gelb, *On Dark Silent Off* is the band's first album without founding member Stefan Németh. As it turns out, any misgivings that I may have had about Radian's place in the current musical landscape were instantly erased, as the trio is every bit as unconventional, imaginative, quietly heavy, relevant, and singular as ever.

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The unusual and enigmatic title of this album is a homage to painter/theoretician Ad Reinhardt, who seems like quite an appropriate inspiration for a cerebral and boundary-pushing ensemble such as Radian. For instance, Reinhardt is best known for his "black paintings," which initially give the impression of total negation, but reveal themselves to actually be nuanced works of various black and near-black shades upon closer inspection. In their own way, Radian do the same thing, eschewing most of the expected and more immediately gratifying aspects of rock music to dwell instead on "microscopic" details and finding ways to make music from seemingly non-musical base materials. In essence, their foundational philosophy seems to be to start off with the intention of doing everything "wrong," then finding a way to make it work anyway. The most extreme examples of that aesthetic on *On Dark Silent Off* are probably "Blue Noise, Black Lake" (built from a recording of the pads on Mats Gustafsson's sax) and "Codes and Sounds" (rooted in a marble rattling on a snare drum), but the whole album is basically a tour de force of amplifier hum, creaking strings, feedback, and unidentifiable noises shaped into satisfying form.

Such an aesthetic could easily result in a bloodless and joyless intellectual exercise in the wrong hands, but Radian's more experimental impulses are viscerally backed up by an absolutely stellar rhythm section. In fact, it is inconceivable that Radian could exist without

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drummer Martin Brandlmayr, as his muscular and freewheeling half-jazz/half-rock drumming is the root of all the album's power, flow, and dynamically compelling shifts in emphasis. Bassist John Norman is certainly quite prominent as well, but his task is far more blunt: providing a distorted, seismic rumble. Relatively new member Martin Sewart may have toughest role of all, as it falls upon him and his guitar to give these pieces a semblance of structure and melody while eluding conventionality (though he does unexpectedly open up on "Blue Noise, Black Lake" with a relatively straightforward solo). For the most part, however, these seven pieces bear only the most precarious relation to rock music. The closing "Rusty Machines, Dusty Carpets" comes closest, as it gradually coheres into a heavy groove that features a rare multiple-note bass line and some explosive crescendos of power chords and crash cymbals. Despite that, the central motif is still largely just a rhythmic blurt of feedback and the whole thing stretches out for a distinctly non-radio-friendly thirteen minutes. "Scary Objects" also falls within spitting distance of resembling a single, but *On Dark Silent Off* is mostly just a wonderful freeform celebration of simmering, unresolved tension.

If this album has any significant flaws, they are most likely by design. Some of the songs admittedly blur together, but that is probably unavoidable when the band is trying so hard to avoid melody or conventional structure. It would probably be more accurate to say that this is very abstract and challenging material that miraculously comes close to songhood. A more significant critique is that the band sometimes errs a bit too on the side of over-conceptual and over-obtuse, as the marble motif in "Codes and Sounds" feels like more of a quixotic gimmick than a genuinely inspiring jumping-off point. That said, Radian amply compensate for their occasional indulgences and overly arty moments with their sheer tightness and effortlessly organic interplay. In that sense, the long delay between albums probably served the band quite well, as several of these pieces have been being chiseled to perfection on the road for years (or in the case of the title piece, performed at a film festival to accompany Peter Tscherkassky's brief found-footage masterpiece, *Outer Space*). More significantly, any minor shortcomings are largely immaterial, as I genuinely love Radian's vision and there is no one else around doing anything similar in any kind of satisfying way: On

Dark Silent Off

sounds like prime Pole and Tortoise mated, but had unexpectedly violent and intense offspring.

Samples:

- [Scary Objects](#)
- [Blue Noise, Black Lake](#)
- [Rusty Machines, Dusty Carpets](#)