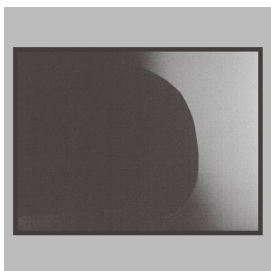


Brainwashed - Norman Westberg, "Jasper Sits Out"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Room40's excavation campaign of Norman Westberg's wonderfully hypnotic and self-released solo guitar work continues with this 2014 tribute to the Westberg family dog. Notably, this release was already reissued once before (as an extremely limited vinyl edition by Hallow Ground), but this new incarnation is both remastered and expanded. More notable still, *Jasper Sits Out*

was the first of Westberg's homemade releases that Lawrence English ever heard, making it the album that inadvertently dragged this quietly beautiful facet of his artistry into the light. As such, I half-expected

Jasper

to be a towering culmination of the entire reissue campaign, but it is more or less on the same level as all the consistently fine preceding releases (aside from one truly dazzling piece).

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The original version of *Jasper* was comprised of two epic 20-minute compositions, the title piece and "Homeset Trunc." The opening "Jasper" is very much textbook Westberg, beginning as kind of a warm and insistent pulsing haze before cleaner tones appear to weave a shifting, jangling, and ringing melodic foreground. The magic of the piece lies in how seamlessly and organically Westberg plays with that central motif, building an undulating pointillist fog with calmly insistent forward momentum. In doing so, he achieves two desirable feats at once: creating a dreamlike and hypnotic throb while ceaselessly crafting an unpredictable and complex web of evolving harmonies and micro-rhythms. It is amusing and perverse that someone associated with the crushing juggernaut of Swans may be even more gifted in the arts of nuance, restraint, and patience. Yet another trait that separates Westberg from like-minded solo guitarists is that his laser-focused control even extends to the compositional arc of his pieces. When an artist is performing alone with just some looping pedals, the tendency is almost always to keep all the plates spinning until all of the necessary elements are in place for the crescendo, then elegantly fade away. "Jasper" admirably bucks that trend by resolving into a final repeating chord. It may not be electrifying or dramatic, but it is undeniably effective and satisfying.

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The atypically industrial "Homeset Trunc" is quite a bit different, boasting a steadily throbbing and churning machine-like rhythm. Naturally, Westberg exploits that strong percussive undercurrent as an opportunity to plunge deeper into abstraction than usual. At first, he keeps things rather subdued and modest, but after several minutes the bottom drops out and the piece grows dramatically more hallucinatory. As the deeper tones plunge and warp, Westberg weaves a rippling web of arpeggios that gradually becomes a dense and swirling cloud of twinkling, pulsing, and undulating layers. Needless to say it is quite beautiful, but the best part is that the heavenly ocean of shimmer is periodically disrupted by surges of ugly vibrato and pitch-shifts to add a welcome element of menace and fragility. I can honestly say that I never heard anything quite like it from another guitarist and I cannot even begin to unravel the mechanics of how it was assembled or performed: it is truly a tour de force. Although it takes a while to catch fire, the pay-off is mesmerizing enough to make it a solid candidate for my favorite Westberg piece to date. Given that, the newly added "A Particular Tuesday" has quite a tough act to follow, but it proves to be a fine coda despite my unreasonably high expectations. It is admittedly a bit less distinctive and more overtly improvisatory than the rest of the album, but it compensates by being more melodic and instantly gratifying. It kind of sounds like a languorous and glimmering ten-minute interlude during a Slowdive live set designed to give the rhythm section a break, but it gradually fades away rather than erupting into a song.

Aside from noting that the bonus track is not quite on the same level as the original album, the only real critiques than can be leveled at *Jasper Sits Out* are about what it is not rather than what it is. Given that Westberg performed the entire album himself with a guitar, there are some very fundamental dynamic, textural, and compositional limitations: for the most part, *Jasper Sits Out*

unavoidably sounds like a solo guitar album. That is perfectly fine by me, of course—when Westberg is in his usual form, as he is on the title piece, he is easily one of the most beguiling and distinctive solo guitarists active today. At his best, however, he transcends the self-imposed constraints of his craft to plunge into sublime and rarefied territory all his own. He is at that level with "Homeset Trunc," reaffirming yet again my belief that Westberg is secretly one of the strongest minimalist composers of his generation.

Samples:

- [Jasper Sits Out](#)
- [Homeset Trunc](#)
- [A Particular Tuesday](#)