

## Brainwashed - Félicia Atkinson, "Hand in Hand"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Félicia Atkinson's radical artistic transformation over the last several years has been quite an interesting one, as each new release seems to distance her further and further from her excellent work as Je Suis Le Petit Chevalier and into much stranger and more challenging territory. With her last major statement, 2015's *A Readymade Ceremony*, Atkinson shifted the focus away from music towards a strong emphasis on whispered spoken-word performance of repurposed found texts mingled with George Bataille and her own poetry.

### *Hand in Hand*

goes still further in that direction, often reducing the accompanying music to an absolute minimum to focus almost entirely on an eclectic and evocative array of hushed readings from old plant books, magazines, JG Ballard, Philip K. Dick, and her own writings. The overall effect is often wonderfully surreal and intimate, but Atkinson's hyper constrained and minimal palette does not offer enough melodicism or dynamic variety to quite carry a full album. A few of the individual pieces, however, are quite mesmerizing (particularly the closing "No Fear But Anticipation").

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The album opens in lovely (if deceptive) fashion with the subtly smeared psychedelia of "I'm Following You," a woozy reverie for Fender Rhodes organ. For better or worse, that is Atkinson's sole foray into conventional melodicism on *Hand in Hand*, a decision that will never stop perplexing me given her oft-stellar past work as a multi-instrumentalist. Intellectually, of course, I get it: during the prime of the first phase of her career, Atkinson was one of the most compelling voices in the cassette underground, but she fit very comfortably within that milieu. With her more recent work, she has forged a much more divergent path that is very much her own. That is certainly gutsy and inspired, but I wish the break with her past had not been quite so decisive sometimes, as it is like watching a great boxer fight with one of his arms tied behind his back. Initially, however, Atkinson's radical minimalism serves her fairly well in the Phillip K. Dick-inspired "VALIS," as the overlapping, French-accented voices of her breathy and sensuously whispered monologue feel increasingly disconcerting and inhuman as an undercurrent of noise-damaged and insectoid textures swells below. While she never attempts anything quite as gauche as singing, Atkinson is admittedly quite skilled at using her voice as an instrument, managing to imbue even the most mundane passages with magnetic intensity and mystery while subtly employing effects to add a patina of hissing, out-of-focus unreality.

The following "Curious in Epidavros" unveils still more of the album's recurring themes, namely a sort of plinking, hollow metal percussion and a blurting, squiggling arsenal of modular synth textures. Variations on those two elements surface quite a lot in the following songs, which is a very disorienting and counterintuitive aesthetic indeed: half primitive home-made marimba, half retro-futurist space music. Naturally, such a strange blend of the ancient and the future leads to some interesting directions, such as the broken, shuddering, and wobbly dub-techno of "Adaptation Assez Facile" or the druggy bass slide and clattering ping-pong ball soundscape of "Monstera Deliciosa." The downside is that many pieces feel like brief, sketch-like experiments rather than fully formed ideas. One notable exception to that trend, however, is "Visnaga," as the hollow plinking percussion feels like a dull, broken bell resonating through the eerie streets of a deserted town and the strangled, sputtering synth flourishes only deepen the air of menace and desolation. Atkinson's hushed and fraught vocals seem especially unsettling and confessional, which is an impressive testament to the perverse genius of her art, as the text merely extolls the virtues of a desert plant. Elsewhere, "A House A Dance A Poem" reprises the deeply broken and warped dub of "Adaptation," tweaking the formula with a buried transmission of chopped, stammering vocal snippets and an invasive, random-sounding high-hat that feels like a grotesque parody of dance music.

Aside from "Visnaga," the unquestionable zenith of *Hand in Hand* is saved for the final piece (the aforementioned "No Fear But Anticipation"). For one, it is quite a bit sexier than the rest of the album, as Atkinson ruminates on the nature of desire. More importantly, she does so over a sensuous and understated groove that offers some rare glimpses of non-subverted chords, melodies, and rhythm. That alone would be enough to make it the album highlight, but it goes still further to build to a wonderful outro of wildly chirping synth jabbering. Aside from that,

*Hand in Hand*

is mostly a curiously challenging, uneasy, and chance-influenced affair that bears little resemblance at all to any of Atkinson's peers in the contemporary experimental music scene.

That gulf would almost be wide enough to make Atkinson seem like a hermetic autodidact/outsider artist, but she actually

*does*

seem to be part of an established movement: she just happened to be born at the wrong time, as her passion for found text, unconventional tools, and bizarre juxtapositions would have made her very much welcome in the Surrealist/Dada milieu or the '60s/'70s avant-garde that birthed so many of her current influences (Robert Ashley, Joan La Barbara, etc.). She certainly seems to share that generation's revolutionary/"anything is possible" mindset, gamely blurring the boundaries between poetry, cut-ups, performance art, conceptual art, and music and even transforming this album into a 7-hour "environmental audiobook" for an exhibition in Rennes.

Such ambition and adventurousness certainly do not always translate into accessible music, but they did not for folks like Stockhausen and John Cage either. While

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is not my favorite Félicia Atkinson album, it is definitely one of her most bold and admirable releases to date, as she is tirelessly straining at the bounds of sound art rather than making any

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attempt to play it safe. When she succeeds, the results can be quite striking.

Samples:

- [VALIS](#)
- [Visnaga](#)
- [No Fear But Anticipation](#)