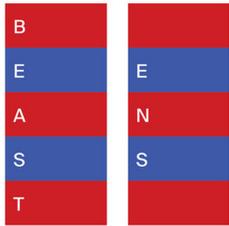


Brainwashed - Beast, "Ens"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Beast is the latest guise of Mountains' Koen Holtkamp, initially created as a solo project that was performance-based and centered around his experiments with 3D laser projections. For Beast's Thrill Jockey debut, however, Holtkamp was very much NOT in performance mode, as *Ens*

was recorded around the birth of his first child and is far more shaped by that event and the resultant lack of sleep than it is by his fascination with light. Unsurprisingly, the resulting album is a strange and fragmented one, shifting from tender, pastoral reveries to eruptions of euphoria to dazzling and sublime displays of compositional prowess on a song-by-song basis. While a few pieces are a bit too straightforwardly pretty for my curmudgeonly ears, Holtkamp has long been one of the most intriguing synth composers in the game and that has not changed. His revelatory flashes of inspiration may be intermittent here, but there are definitely impressive when they happen. The opening "Paprika Shorts" is easily one of the best pieces Holtkamp has recorded to date.

[Thrill Jockey](#)

Ens (Latin for "being") opens in extremely strong fashion with the aforementioned "Paprika Shorts," which steadily builds from a burbling synth arpeggio into an intricate tapestry of overlapping and intertwining patterns and melodies. Holtkamp has always been quite a brilliant architect at assembling vibrant cascades of colorful and effervescent synth tones and he outdoes himself here, unleashing a shimmering spray of twinkling notes as he slowly locks into an infectiously lurching and evolving groove. "Paprika Shorts" is more than just a great hook executed beautifully though, as it seamlessly and unexpectedly transforms into a deeper and darker final act of glimmering minor key arpeggios and gurgling snatches of vocoder-esque speech fragments. Holtkamp achieves a similar degree of success with the other bookend, "For Otto." It is considerably more understated, gentle, and swaying than "Paprika," languorously bubbling, sputtering, and plinking with a warm central melody. Again, however, Holtkamp elegantly steers the piece towards something greater, first adding a shimmering layer of steel drum-like ripples, then allowing the piece to blossom into a coda of warm, rich chords and

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twinkling streaks of synth tones that feel like a sky full of falling stars. If "Paprika" and "Otto" were representative of the entire album, *Ens* would be quite an unambiguous triumph. Instead, however, the mid-section of the album explores a number of alternate paths with varying degrees of success.

Of the remaining five pieces, the lengthier ones tend to be the most effective. In the piano-based "Color Feel," for example, Holtkamp augments his slow and simple chord progression with a tumbling and lively torrent of shifting and overlapping patterns that takes a page from the great minimalist composers, yet adapts that aesthetic to fit his own genius for intricate layering. While it admittedly errs a bit too much on the side of radiantly cheery for my taste, it is nonetheless a thing of beauty as far as craftsmanship is concerned. Holtkamp keeps a lot of metaphorical plates spinning and each of them plays an integral role in shaping the arc and cumulative power of the whole. Elsewhere, "Staren" heads in a similarly beatific direction, unfolding as a rolling cascade of marimba-like arpeggios. Holtkamp throws some inventive textural and rhythmic curveballs into the mix though, creating a endearingly off-kilter pulse with pointillist, exhalation-like synths and an erratically stuttering and panning synth throb plopped right in the middle of it all. Again, I am not in love with the tone of the piece, yet Holtkamp departs from the straightforward enough to win me over. The few other pieces on the album feel a bit more insubstantial and incidental though, like they are just pleasantly burbling interludes that merely serve as bridges between the more significant fare. The sole exception is "Edb," which feels like a slow-motion and darkly lysergic companion to "Staren," transforming into a *minor* key marimba motif that seethes with panning and undulating synth swells. It would be a contender for one of the stronger moments on the album if it had more of an arc, but it is essentially just a brief vamp that presents a cool theme, then fades away rather than evolving.

It is hard to tell how much my opinion of *Ens* is colored by subjectivity, as my own preferences are a bigger factor than usual when it comes to Holtkamp's work. On the one hand, his work is often informed by a New Age/Kosmische influence that is not my cup of tea at all, and I am deeply weary of the glut of synthesizer albums that have flooded the scene in recent years. Yet despite all that, I still tend to enjoy a lot of his work, so he is clearly doing something very right. With pieces like "Paprika Shorts," Holtkamp transcends his milieu to be a great composer who just happens to use synthesizers. During his less transcendent moments, he merely reaffirms that he is among the top tier of contemporary synth artists, which is not a bad place to be either.

Also, while being a great arranger and editor is not exactly sexy or attention-grabbing, those talents are rare to warm my heart when I encounter them. I just wish the actual content of

Ens

was consistently on the same level as Holtkamp's craftsmanship. Alas. Ultimately,

Ens

is an enjoyable if uneven album rather than a great one, but I certainly admire Holtkamp's ability to remain a distinctive and compelling voice even while expanding his aesthetic beyond the bounds of my personal taste. More importantly, the few times when the album catches fire are a legitimate delight. More highlights would have been welcome, but I certainly dig the ones that

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are here.

Samples can be found [here](#).