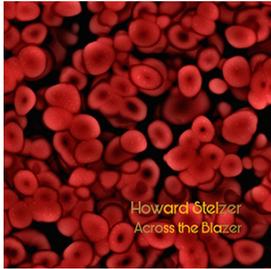


Brainwashed - Howard Stelzer, "Across the Blazer"

Written by Creag Dunton

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The latest work from New England's legendary tape manipulator (presented on CD, in a bit of irony) is another work in a series of releases that reflects his more meditative, contemplative side. Like the somewhat recent *Dawn Songs* tape, *Across the Blazer* features Stelzer using his array of tape machines to construct vast expanses of sound, less about bent motors or mangled tape, but more the enveloping warmth of analog imperfection. The end product is surprisingly inviting and relaxing, words that are rarely apt descriptors of something generally labeled as "noise".

[Marginal Frequency](#)

Across the Blazer is two lengthy pieces Stelzer composed over a two year period, with some live source material carefully blended in, but where the studio treatments end and the live improvisations begin are anything but distinct. "Selective Memory (You Never Know Absolutely Quite Where You Are)" has Stelzer leading off with a deep, far off rumble akin to the vibrations of a tape deck motor, but the sound is eventually shaped into that of a murky, deep sea-like bubbling. After allowing the piece to develop, Stelzer patiently introduced passages of pleasant, soothing white noise like layers. Other than the densely piled, telltale hiss of analog tape, the material he is working from is largely blurry and intentionally out of focus.

Ostensibly it is a noise composition, but the final product is anything but jarring or unpleasant to the ears. Instead it is a consistent, expansive blanket of sound, with the extreme frequencies rolled off to smooth out any sharp or rough patches. Eventually the light, sustained noise is faded back out as delicately as it was brought in, leaving only the low-end rumble that was there from the onset.

For the nearly 28 minute "Across the Blazer," the live sourcing is a bit more overt from incidental location recordings that open the piece, although only briefly. Like "Selective Memory," Stelzer focuses less on collages, edits, or jolting sounds and instead continues the pleasant, enveloping sounds culled from tape. Compared to "Selective Memory," the material he works from here is

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more tonal in nature, almost sounding like an overly saturated, extremely worn cassette of a symphonic recording with only the barest essentials of tone remaining.

Again, hissing midrange noise becomes the focus, but also again in an ear pleasing, placid context. The unrelenting approach is not far removed from the harsh noise wall subgenre, but with all of the harshness excised. Instead it is like the sonic equivalent of gradually being engulfed by a gigantic wave, but instead of frigid liquid, it is like warm bathwater and happening in slow motion. Throughout the composition the mix continues to build and pile up, but stays firmly rooted in that gentle, beautiful context before lightly fading away into shimmering space. I have yet to find a work from Howard Stelzer that I have not vigorously enjoyed, and *Across the Blazer* is no exception to that pattern of releases. Of course I am still looking forward to hearing more of his dynamic, collage like works, but this softer, gentler side to his art is just as amazing.

[Samples available here](#)