

Brainwashed - The Gamelan of the Walking Warriors

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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My fascination with the Sublime Frequencies and Nonesuch Explorer labels goes back many years, but it has been quite a long time since I have been properly floored by a revelatory feat of ethnological scavenging or scholarship. I was starting to worry that my ears had lost their capacity for wonder until this 2017 gem from France's eclectic Akuphone label belatedly crossed my path. Unsurprisingly, the compiler (Vincenzo Della Ratta) previously surfaced on SF with 2016's *Kwangkay: Funerary Music Of The Dayak Benuaq Of Borneo* and this album returns to a similar theme, swapping out the funeral music of Borneo for that of Bali. Only part of this album covers field recordings of Balinese funerals, however, as the other half is culled from some truly visceral and mesmerizing rehearsal space recordings of the more contemporary and visionary Dharma Shanti Orchestra. Both sides have certainly their appeal, but it is exclusively the Dharma Shanti material that makes the leap from "this is interesting and unique traditional music" to "this is what I desperately want the music of the future to sound like."

[Akuphone](#)

This album takes its name from the English translation of "gamelan beleganjur," which is the term for the processional gamelan orchestras common to government ceremonies, Balinese Hindu rituals, and (of course) war. I suspect that Balinese gamelan ensembles have not been inspiring glorious victories on the battlefield much in recent days, so that facet is absent from this collection, as *The Gamelan of the Walking Warriors* covers the more contemporary state of the form. In fact, that is exactly what interested Della Ratta in the project in the first place, as the bevy of traditional Indonesian gamelan albums available in the West predate the stylistic innovations and evolutions that have occurred over the last three decades. I am delighted to say that Della Ratta's instincts were dead-on, as this album is quite unlike any other gamelan performance that I have heard. As he puts it himself, there is a more "melodious and meditative quality" that is "quite distinct from the spectacular and breathlessly frantic kreasi beleganjur that we are usually offered." I have no doubt that Della Ratta is right about that, but it does not quite convey the full appeal of these recordings: the reason that the Dharma Shanti recordings sound so revelatory is that they combine that entrancing melodic aesthetic with an impressive degree of sharpness and physicality. There is a violence and jaggedness to crashing, scraping cymbals and pounding drums that makes this a deliciously brutalist and ecstatic take on "meditative."

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The opening "Pemungkah" is a perfect distillation of everything wonderful about these recordings, as it sounds like some kind of occult ritual of visceral, post-apocalyptic junkyard minimalism. The crux of the piece is a simple metallophone melody that hypnotically circles and loops, yet it stays compelling because its harmonic context languorously see-saws between two deeper sustained tones. It is weirdly beautiful in both its unhurried, trancelike repetition and its texture, which resembles a ramshackle collection of tin cans. The cymbals are what truly elevate the piece to a thing of genius though, as their scraping rhythm sounds like a roomful of people vigorously sharpening rusty knives in unison. That basic template repeats again and again for the four Dharma Shanti pieces, but the ensemble consistently manages to transform that hyperlimited palette into something wonderfully churning and organic through the ebb and flow of the pounding drums and slicing cymbals.

The second half of the album is a bit more varied and traditional, as Della Ratta recorded some actual ceremonies in the village of Peliang, unexpectedly trading the focused intensity of the first half for something considerably more shapeshifting and surreal. While some of the individual pieces are a bit too busy and cheery for my liking (resembling an out-of-tune music box that is playing too fast), they form a compelling and vivid whole, as the album stops being exclusively about the gamelan and becomes more of an impressionist tour of small village life. To some degree, the profound difference between the album's two halves makes it feel like two different albums have been bizarrely stitched together, yet that strange sequencing actually works in *Walking Warriors'* favor: I love the first half, but the aesthetic is probably too limited to sustain an entire album on its own without diminishing returns.

Amusingly, I first heard this album without knowing anything at all about its background or its participants and immediately assumed that it was the work of fringe-dwelling avant-garde iconoclasts like Alan Courtis or the Volcano The Bear milieu: it struck my ears as too radical and contemporary to be actual Indonesian gamelan music. Naturally, I felt like a cultural chauvinist jackass upon learning more about the album, but my error makes perverse sense, as Western experimental musicians have been appropriating ideas and themes from Eastern traditional music for so long that the distinctions between the two are not nearly as obvious as they once were. I guess I finally found the place where the mouth and tail of the Ouroboros meet. Aside from that, I was also struck by how much the aesthetic of the recordist and the quality of the recording impacts albums in this vein, as a tinny/naturalist "field recording" approach can make everything sound bloodlessly academic, while a more produced approach can turn vibrant performances into something that feels toothless and homogenized for Western consumption. To his credit, Dell Ratta managed to capture the Dharma Shanti Orchestra in a raw and explosively Albini-esque way that feels appropriately bracing and vital. *The Gamelan of the Walking Warriors* may not be a perfect and seamless collection, but the high points are wonderful enough to make that seem irrelevant.

Samples can be found [here](#) .