



Over the last decade, M83 have traversed a course from faceless electronic music, to washes of synth-pop with increasingly stronger hooks, to something distinctly more stadium-sized with their recent album, *Hurry Up, I'm Dreaming*. Their concert in Austin last weekend proved that bigger, broader, catchier, and more ambitious is a fine goal, but can also eventually lead to a creative dead end.

18 May 2012, Austin, Texas.

Music has always been more interesting to me as part of the broader cultural conversation than as isolated snapshots of sound without broader context. Handmade noise cassettes, basement shows, limited CD-r pressings: while there's nothing inherently wrong with exclusivity, obscurity, and the intentionally narrow appeal of much underground music (including 90% of Brainwashed coverage), I find myself naturally drawn to music that straddles the line between appealing to a broader audience and, simultaneously, making aesthetic choices to push against that same mass appeal. To be honest, I often find myself at odds with not only peers and listeners, but my fellow writers: "M83 is a bit too mainstream for Brainwashed," texted site founder Jon Whitney the night before this review's publication.

In many ways, Mr. Whitney may be right. M83's cultural cache and popularity reached a tipping point last year. Their broad brushstrokes of electronic synth-pop have always been imbued with pop hooks, starting with the noticeably catchy refrain of "Run into Flowers" (from 2003's still fantastic *Dead Cities, Red Seas, and Lost Ghosts*, which elicited a shrug from Mr. Whitney) and ramping up from there. Their best work was yet to come: 2005's

Before the Dawn Heals Us

was their most cinematic album, and they snuck a couple pop gems ("Don't Save Us from the Flames" and "Teen Angst") in between the album's slow-motion grandeur. 2008's

Saturdays = Youth

saw M83 move into full-on '80s synth-pop revival mode, and the band's stadium ambitions effectively came to life. With that album, they toured behind Depeche Mode (yay), the Killers (boo), and Kings of Leon (gag), and Lord knows their next album would be built for those same arenas.

Brainwashed - M83

Written by Stephen Bush

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2011 brought with it M83's most ambitious album, *Hurry Up, We're Dreaming*, which made waves with tastemakers (Pitchfork's #1 song and #3 album of the year) and won over a whole new set of listeners. Personally, I found the album overpraised; it was frequently compared to the sprawling scope of the Smashing Pumpkins' *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*.

It was a bold move, and it was inspired, and in the same way garbage. Regardless, M83's newly expanded fanbase was out in full force for last week's show at Stubb's Bar-B-Q in Austin, so I suppose there's no arguing with the album's success. As an enthusiastic fan for the preceding 9 years, I have cooled considerably on M83 at the same time the band is making strides to appeal to its broader fanbase, which can make for an awkward listening experience at times.

For me personally, M83's show in Austin was chock-full of ups and downs. All new songs played were predictable enough; some were pleasant, others seemed dull. I have never quite warmed to the band's latest single, "Reunion," which trades the majesty of their best work for a sort of yelping, upbeat indie-pop that doesn't suit their strengths. "Steve McQueen" was filmed through the same widescreen lens as *Before the Dawn Heals Us*, but stuffs its ambitions into a rote verse-chorus structure with no surprises. Elsewhere, "Wait" just seemed to drag endlessly, like ambient music that was going nowhere by mistake, not by intent. The lone winner from the new material was "Midnight City," complete with the saxophonist who showed up for their Jimmy Fallon appearance—cheesy, sure, but as uplifting a tune as the first time I heard it last year.

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