

Brainwashed - Coil, "Colour Sound Oblivion"

Written by John Kealy

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About five years after first announcing it, Peter Christopherson has finally completed the monolithic tombstone for Coil in the form of this lavish 16 DVD box set. Compiling videos of live performances from 1983 up until their final performance in 2004, *Colour Sound Oblivion* charts the evolution of a sensational group through one of their most fecund periods. Coil seemed to be on a consistently upward spiral in the time period covered by this collection, John Balance's artistic vision becoming stronger and more compelling when connecting with an audience. Despite some ropey moments either in terms of sound quality or the certainly not HD video,

Colour Sound Oblivion

exceeds all expectations and is as remarkable as could be ever hoped for.

[Threshold House](#)

The first disc documents one of Coil's early live outings and the focus is more in the realm of performance art than musicianship. A mostly naked Balance and John Gosling dabble in the middle of the Air Gallery with syringes, wire, nail varnish, ointments and blood while Marc Almond reads a wonderfully vile tract of text. At this point, Christopherson did not play a direct role in the performance but provided the backing tapes and can be seen photographing the performance in the audience (one of the shots ending up in the sleeve notes for Zos Kia's *Transparent*

CD). While probably not for the squeamish, the performance does not shock now like it must have at the time (at one point Nick Cave can be seen exiting the venue, supposedly in disgust). Although, Balance's violent seizure-like contortions towards the end were unsettling to say the least. Despite this not being a highlight of Coil's career, this video shows the consistency of Coil as an artistic entity: ritual, sexuality, challenging imagery and sound all present from the very beginning.

Skip 15 years of live inactivity to 1999 when Coil's altered ego ELpH played a short performance in Berlin which marked their renewed interest in presenting their music outside of the studio. Christopherson describes how Thighpaulsandra goaded Coil into returning to the stage which ended up being one of the group's best decisions in their long career. The Berlin and subsequent London Royal Festival Hall performances are unfortunately absent from *Colo*

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but Coil's appearance at the Sonar festival in Spain in 2000 more than makes up their absence. The audio was previously released on

Live One

so sonically I knew what to expect but the video exacerbates the already psychedelic sounds as Coil move around the stage in fluffy, mirrored suits, bathed in purple and black light.

Again the performance relied heavily on ritual, a prone Balance being presented with crystals by Thighpaulsandra and the shimmering other-worldliness of the tiny mirrors on their costumes makes it feel like there are dozens of tiny ruptures in the fabric of their being. The camera enters this space, almost excluding the audience completely, concentrating on the vibes rather than documenting the humdrum process of using a laptop on stage. The final few minutes are especially intense as Balance screams out "God please fuck my mind for good!" over the frenetic jabbering of "Elves" as a sparkly, mostly nude female dancer gyrates manically like some kind of heathen James Bond intro sequence.

From here, Christopherson has included at least one representative show from most of Coil's different live incarnations. The next two discs cover two similar shows from 2001 in New York and Moscow (the latter originally released as *Live Two*). Visually, the group have developed into a collection of spectral straitjackets wandering around the stage as the black light made only their suits glow intensely in the dark. They look like the terrifying entity from M.R. James' classic ghost story

Oh, Whistle, and I'll

Come to You, My Lad

got its mates together and formed a band. The New York disc shows the suits off better but the Moscow recording gives a much better idea of how multisensory Coil's performances were; perfectly combining music, magic and performance art.

Both shows follow the same basic structure when it comes to music, a mix of old and new songs, all liberally improvised. On the New York disc, "What Kind of Animal Are You?" comes loping out of the speakers like a pack of wolves hungry for some amphetamines and nightclub. Moscow's "Higher Beings Command" is classic Coil; Balance's vocals perched on waves of disintegrating electronics and the air heavy with smoke and mystery. However, in both concerts it is "Constant Shallowness Leads to Evil" where they shine brightest (almost literally considering the glowing costumes). The feedbacking synthesizers, powerful vocals and relentless volume all combine to generate a quivering mass of rapturous Armageddon.

The next phase of their live career is marked visually by the appearance of Massimo and Pierce, their nude bodies painted like the ghosts of murdered lovers. Musically, Cliff

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Stapleton's hurdy gurdy added a new texture to Coil's repertoire. Along with the ghost boys, the hurdy gurdy's evocative whine haunts the music. Stapleton comes into his own during "Slur" on the Bologna disc, the instrument rushing through the words like the dry wind through the desert roses that Balance is singing about. The Bologna disc is let down by an annoying split screen format but at least it sounds good (again, originally released on *Live Three*).

They run through a similar set on the Den Haag disc which, although hazy, shows the stage better than on the Bolognese performance, but the soundboard recording is not always full as Bologna's mixed sound. Yet this is part of the charm, the rough edges and foggy sonics are part of *Colour Sound Oblivion's* DNA; grit is in its blood. I do not think that a textbook filming job for the Den Haag gig would represent the chaotic, visceral and messy performance any better. The radically different set of lyrics and musical focus for "Anarcadia: All Horned Animals" here makes for a charged atmosphere from the beginning of the concert. This persists until its end of the performance when the tension boils over and Balance is engulfed in an orgiastic frenzy by Massimo and Pierce; fake blood everywhere.

Vienna/Prague is the same audio as *Live Four* but unfortunately "Last Rites of Spring" is absent with no explanation given. However, the rest of the songs are all present and accompanied by one of the better shot videos thanks to five cameras in the audience. "The Universe is a Haunted House" is still the highlight of the performance and the final heartbeat/distant artillery thud of "An Unearthly Red" again feeds the apocalyptic fires that powered Coil. They explored the same themes in Königsberg as they did in Vienna and thankfully "Last Rites of Spring" was included on the DVD on this occasion as it is a fantastic performance as Balance screams "Fuck off we're feral!" repeatedly at the audience (although at first I thought he was shouting "Fuck off Will Ferrell!"). A third show from this tour in Thessalonika has perhaps the shoddiest camera work of the box but the best sound as a proper multi-track recording was made of the performance.

While the unexpected was commonly expected at Coil shows, in 2003 there were three shows where Balance was unable to turn up to scheduled performances and Coil performed as a duo of Christopherson and Thighpaulsandra. One of these concerts, at Montreal's Mutek festival, is included here to illustrate this short-lived variation. Well captured both in audio and visual terms, it distances itself from other Coil performances by focusing on different aspects of their back catalog in the absence of Balance's vocals. The hypnotic qualities of "Blue Rats" and then new "Triple Sun" compensate for the lack of any flashy moves on stage by the performers; these pieces are all about moving listeners both mentally and physically, particularly the strong danceable core of "Blue Rats." "The First Five Minutes After Death" closes the set in a chilling and hallucinatory fashion. Out of all the pieces I would love to hear live, this comes in the top three so being able to vicariously enjoy the experience on DVD goes some way in making up for the fact that I never will experience the music myself.

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The next three discs are given over to the *Black Antlers* period of their live performances and one of Coil's more ridiculous ideas for stage costumes. Christopherson and Thighpaulsandra perform inside giant, Dalí-esque shower curtains as Balance flails about in front of them in some strange Elizabethan outfit with the arse cut out of it. The Paris show is the clearest shot concert in the entire set, obviously higher end digital video cameras had recently become affordable at that time. The sound is superb too, every little sound is captured perfectly.

Performing the entire *Black Antlers*

album along with a smattering of other songs including "Tattooed Man" (a studio version of which would finally appear on

The Ape of Naples

), at this point Coil seemed more intent on their future than they did on previous tours. All the new material was played as if this was the group's last night on earth and they would be forever judged on their performance. The inimitable "Sex With Sun Ra" provided a gravitational center for these concerts and on each of the discs, it is during this song that the group seem to fully embrace everything: music, performance, life, death and, of course, sex.

By far the most anticipated recording to be included in *Colour Sound Oblivion* is Coil's final concert. Despite opening with a disclaimer warning about the quality of the recording sources, the Dublin show comes across well on DVD. Granted the sound is a little ropey and one of the cameramen had a fetish for the backs of people's heads but based on my memory of that evening, the atmosphere of Coil's performance has been retained. Opening with a loose reinterpretation of "A White Rainbow" from the

Winter Solstice: North

EP, the music centered mainly around amorphous improvisation and new material. The core trio of Balance, Christopherson and Thighpaulsandra were joined again by Stapleton on hurdy gurdy. The final minutes sees Coil doing the most unexpected of cover versions: "Going Up."

Francois Testory sings as he does on

The Ape of Naples

version but here his vocals are less controlled but the emotional weight of his performance comes through strong. This emotional weight is not just in retrospect after Balance's death but at the time I remember getting goosebumps at Testory's performance.

Aside from the live performances, there are numerous extras dotted throughout the set. Many of the DVDs feature multiple angle options, allowing the viewer to watch the animations projected on to the stage or the concert itself. The final two discs form a "Coil Reconstruction Kit," a collection of the backing tracks used live along with the appropriate projections all under a Creative Commons license. It is a nice touch but for someone like me who does not tend to tinker musically with samples or mixing software, it is more of a curiosity than the interactive experience Christopherson had intended. Yet, it works in another way as it allows a glimpse behind the curtain to see how the Coil beast ticked. It also works as a collection of alternative

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versions, a "greatest hits" album where none of the original recordings are included. Granted we have to sing the lyrics for ourselves but the Coil karaoke market has been ignored for too long.

Some of the concerts feature back stage footage which is variable in quality and interest, seeing them pose for photos is not the most riveting televisual experience I have had. However, the interviews included with the Vienna/Prague and Mutek discs are both enlightening and entertaining. The Vienna/Prague interview lacks Balance (as Christopherson dryly explains "he's past the point of discussion right now") but Christopherson and Simon Norris both give a fascinating explanation of Coil's ethos. Interviewed in Montreal, Christopherson talks of his fears of ending up like Rick Wakeman, playing concerts on his own surrounded by keyboards and telling stories in between songs: "That's never going to happen to me!" I cannot help but chuckle at that considering his recent performances as The Threshold HouseBoys Choir comes dangerously close to this description (but Wakeman never sounded half as good). It is frustrating watching these interviews when Christopherson mentions even more projects which never saw the light of day including an anniversary release with Marc Almond for AIDS awareness and a cover of REM's "Losing My Religion" (!).

Finally, something must be said about the presentation of *Colour Sound Oblivion*. This is certainly one of the most beautifully presented releases by any artist I have seen. The wooden box is sturdy and heavy, it feels like its contents are important before it is opened (although there are reports of boxes coming apart but there is a note about that on the Threshold House website for those affected). Inside, there are a number of cloth bags containing the DVDs made from the same materials as Coil's stage costumes. This simple idea adds a lot to the experience as it adds a tactile element to the color and the sound. A booklet containing Christopherson's notes and thoughts on the project along with the program for Balance's funeral are also included. Finally, there are dozens of postcard-sized prints of Coil's travel snaps and photos from audience members wrapped in blue ribbon which range from the artistic to the absurd.

Although this is now nearly sold out, a standard version of the box set is mooted but it will not have the same decadent presentation. However, for those who were on the fence about buying this, the actual content of *Colour Sound Oblivion* is worth the asking price alone. Christopherson has obviously put his heart and soul into its production and the performances themselves are jaw-dropping in most cases. My only problem is that way back when this was first announced, there was mention of Coil's videos being included as part of the set but unfortunately they did not make the cut. Aside from that, this is a dream come true for Coil fans and rivals similar box sets like Throbbing Gristle's

TG 24

and Albert Ayler's

Holy Ghost

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in its scope and presentation. Usually I will watch a DVD once and not return to it but I am already looking forward to going through

Colour Sound Oblivion

again and again.