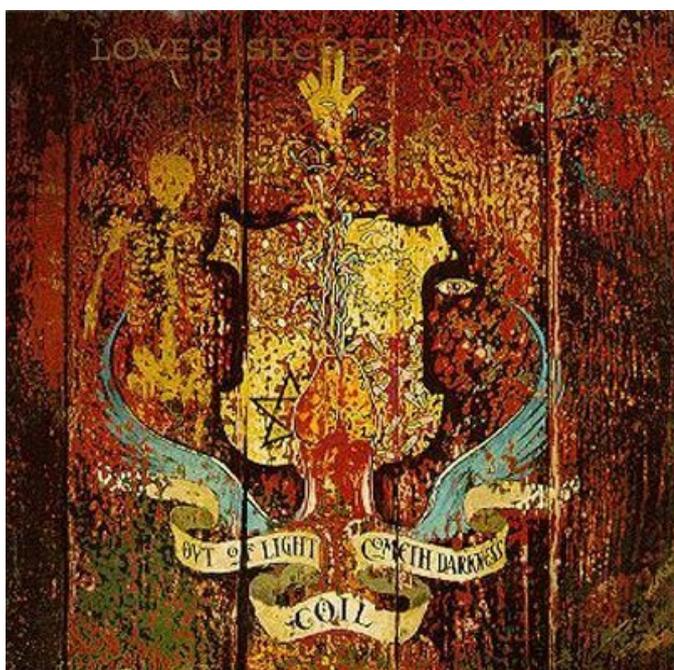


Brainwashed - Coil, "Love's Secret Domain" (Jonathan Dean)

Written by Jonathan Dean

Sunday, 31 July 2011 12:52 - Last Updated Monday, 08 August 2011 00:54

When I first became aware of Coil in 1996, *Love's Secret Domain* was already both legendary and inaccessible. Legendary because it loomed large in the Coil discography as the moment when that most esoteric of underground British groups came closest to a breakout, an album with crossover potential beyond the post-industrial ghetto. However, because I came to Coil rather late, and because I lived at that time in a cultural backwater, *Love's Secret Domain* remained a tantalizing enigma. The album could not be found on shelves, and because it was out of print, it could not be special ordered from my local import-friendly alternative record store.



[Threshold House](#)

Those who came of age in the years before Internet ubiquity will remember that the only way to find out about non-MTV music was through rumor and innuendo. One could catch a brief reference in a book or magazine, look at song credits in the end titles of a movie, order catalogs from the back of magazines and read the capsule descriptions, trying to mentally extrapolate the music from the hyperbolic prose. It would be another two years before I discovered Brainwashed.com, which ended up answering a lot of my questions, as well as creating more questions, but at this point I was utterly in the dark. Like many others, I suspect, I was introduced to Coil by a cognoscenti, an older friend who had lived in other cities and mixed with circles of subaltern types who knew about good drugs and good music. I was right at the beginning of my personal innerspace explorations, having recently tripped on acid for the first time. Because I was largely dependent upon my friend's limited record collection, Coil remained a puzzle for which many of the pieces were missing. He had the Some Bizzare CD edition of *Ho*

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rse Rotorvator

, maybe an Unnatural History or two, and that was it. He knew about Love's Secret Domain, had the title track on a mixtape, but the rest of the album was a mystery.

Because of the sly acrostic of the title, *LSD* promised to be especially psychedelic; surely it was the most twisted, mindblowing album in the Coil catalog. The album became a personal musical holy grail. If I could only get my hands on it, I would finally reach the apex of my explorations of the psychedelic and the occult. It would be much more than music; it would be a revelation; a Dionysian symphony of all that is dark and glittering, menacing and intelligent. I would moult off my human skin and finally be free to move among the denizens of a secret world. The fact that the album had the reputation of being "dance music" - acid house and Madchester rave filtered through the peculiar obsessive world of Coil - made it all the more appealing in my fantasies, as I was simultaneously becoming fascinated with late 1990s IDM - Autechre, Aphex Twin, etc. - which represented a somewhat similar intervention in the history of electronic dance music. I caught a reference to the album in Jim Derogatis' book

Kaleidoscope Eyes

, in which the author - a rockist crank nonplussed by the entire industrial genre - claims LSD as the sole example of an industrial group recording a masterful psychedelic album.

When I finally heard the album in its entirety thanks to the advent of Napster (I got hold of a used CD a few months later), I was puzzled. Here I had been expecting a cataclysmic, uber-perverse Dionysian rave; a Bacchanalia of beats and aggression, with the dark occult undercurrents that had made albums like *Scatology* and *Horse Rotorvator* such classics of the 1980s underground. I was expecting *Skinny Puppy* with the machine funk replaced by Enochian disco. I didn't get that at all. What I got instead was strange and alienating, a dark exotica record with only two or three tracks that could rightly be called dance songs, and a whole lot of unglued whimsy packed with dizzying sonic detail. The album did not partake in the constellation of transgressive cultural references of past albums, nor did it toy with explicit homoeroticism, the alchemy of coprophagy, or savage parodies of pop music. Coil seemed to have shed nearly all explicit connections to the lineage of *Throbbing Gristle* and *Psychic TV* from whence they arose, as well as the occult signifiers that had marked them as part of the 1980s British underground. In its place was a strange concoction of throbbing organic rhythms, crackling electricity, and kaleidoscopic sampler symphonies. The album was permeated with the deeply unsettling, resonant tones of didgeridoo and Spanish guitar, punctuated by a pair of truly bizarre iterations of acid house. It is an enigmatic album that seems finally to be utterly idiosyncratic, a concept album about chaos, voluntary dementia, and the hidden London that pullulates just beyond the borders of awareness and sanity.

LSD is the soundtrack to stumbling out of a London tube station late at night in an amphetamine buzz, being ushered into a secret cabaret with no sign on the door, snogging rentboys on

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MDMA while a drunken lounge singer in smeared lipstick blathers inanities into your ear and a techno DJ spins two rooms over. The album evokes a profound sense of urban bewilderment, an effortless sense of surrealism brought on by the contingencies of eccentric nocturnal characters marinating in a dangerous cocktail of intoxicants. As the senses become increasingly deranged, Coil's response to the encroaching madness is a jaded laugh. When they can't laugh anymore, they begin tuning into the strange frequencies, dancing to the demented rhythms. Finally, in the midst of this dance comes a revelation, a secret heart of sickness unto death which fuels these subterranean extravagances. The album culminates in an anthemic, carnivalesque finale in which everything comes into focus, but nothing is resolved. You can't give in to the madness and leave completely unscathed. As anyone who has lived the life of a wanton aesthete can attest, it becomes increasingly difficult to sweep up the broken pieces of one's psyche every morning, to shake off the previous night's excesses and return to some semblance of sanity. Once the invisible contagion begins to worm its way into one's heart, one is inexorably caught between heaven and hell, angels taking poisons in rotting pavilions.

Predictably, critics - when they bothered to pay attention - generally misconstrued *Love's Secret Domain*. It was not a dance record, and it was not Coil's play for the mainstream. In fact, it was the most challenging and ambiguous set of recordings the band had released to date, and the first sign of things to come. As far as I can tell, the only reason the album gained this reputation is due to a clever marketing campaign. Also, the album's relative availability, being distributed on Wax Trax! in the states, may have contributed to its high profile. Not only was the album utterly confounding to those expecting an electro-industrial dance album, it was similarly alienating to many Coil fans, who were looking for another pop-industrial song like "Anal Staircase" or "Slur." Opening with the frenetic cut-and-paste sound collage of "Disco Hospital," followed by the fecund synthesizer gurgles and sparking circuitry of "Teenage Lightning," the album manages to perversely frustrate any such expectations. The nocturnal lunacy reaches an early zenith on "Things Happen," in which Little Annie slurs a brilliant off-the-cuff monologue positively twisted in its surreal banality. It's certainly not a pop song. In fact, listeners must wait until "Windowpane" before getting anything with a semblance of the song structure familiar from previous Coil LPs. Latter-day criticism has tended to view "The Snow" poorly, as an aberration which now sounds dated. Listening back, I am surprised how well "The Snow" coheres with the rest of the album; the structure and melodic hook may seem predictable, but as with the rest of the album, the devil is in the details. The snare and hat samples breathe and pulsate with a preternatural life, and the wintry atmospherics coil and circulate with an organic logic that transcends the song's machinic structure.

LSD is repetitive, an album with a series of recurring themes, groups of songs offering variations of similar soundworlds: the two parts of "Teenage Lightning" and "Lorca Not Orca" forming a clear triptych, and two tracks utilizing processed didgeridoo ("Where Even The Darkness Is Something To See" and "Further Back And Faster"). This repetition makes the album seem slight on repeated listens, but also serves to strengthen its conceptual

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cohesiveness. The only true anomaly on the album is "Titan Arch," which would not have sounded out of place on *Horse Rotorvator*, but whose lyrics offer a key to understanding the unifying theme of the album: "There are thrones underground / And monarchs upon them / They walk serene / In the spaces between." Further evidence of the hidden, subterranean London is provided by the dialogue sample which opens "Further Back And Faster," and provides its title. The sample is from Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell's 1970 cult film *Performance*

, in which a gangster unwittingly crosses boundaries of culture, sexuality and identity while hiding out in the London home of an eccentric ex-rock star and his two girlfriends. London's hidden recesses and underground monarchs serve as the catalyst for psychedelic transformation, mutations that ultimately shift and splinter identities in a chaotic and unpredictable way. It is no coincidence that following the release of LSD, Coil began to mercurially shift identities, releasing works under a number of different project names: Black Light District, ElpH, Time Machines, etc. With LSD, Coil were reborn into a new adolescence, a playfully experimental period in which they would produce some of their finest work.



When I finally got my hands on a physical copy of the album, one of the most intriguing things was the sleeve art. Putting aside the obviously brilliant outhouse door cover by Steven Stapleton, it was the group photographs which emphasized the uniqueness of the record. No asymmetrical haircuts, tattoos or piercings. No shit-covered extremities or Artaudian visual excess. John, Peter, and Stephen have conservative haircuts. John is dressed in a baggy, shiny jacket, the sort of casual clubwear that defined Madchester fashion. Sleazy wears a black hoodie. Posing on a nondescript London street, a young man (possibly named Otto Avery), who had no actual musical input on the album, stands with the rest of the group like a human accessory. In another photo, Balance wears a jester cap - an obvious signifier of lunacy - but maintains a neutral expression on his face. This was a conscious step away from industrial aesthetics, and a conscious step towards the uncanny. Psychopaths look like ordinary people.

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One needn't cultivate the visual presentation of a Victorian madman to plumb the depths of sanity, to sample the wormeaten buffet of false identities made possible by the anonymity of the night world. Dressing in nondescript street fashion was an aesthetic choice that paid rich dividends for this period of Coil. Looking normal was Coil's way of looking strange.

Even those that are not convinced of *LSD*'s status as one of Coil's finest albums will, I suspect, have a certain fondness for the album's title track. A masterpiece of lyrical sampling, and the final, wrenching paroxysm of the slithering exotica of the rest of the album, the song "Love's Secret Domain" is a masterpiece by any measure. Deftly combining references to David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (by way of Roy Orbison), William Blake's

Songs of Innocence

and the surrealist strategy of elective derangement, Balance's lyrical juxtapositions are able to illuminate secret resonances between each. The "disease" that Jeffrey inseminates Dorothy with in

Blue Velvet

becomes the phallic "invisible worm" of Blake's poem; the unrestrained anal-sadistic id of Frank becomes the mad dog biting through his leash, the creative psychosexual will set loose in the night. The multivalent image of the rose contains in it the notion of love, innocence and purity, but also prostitution, anal sex ("stemming the rose"), that which presents itself for the plucking. Balance's voice is pitched down to an extreme growl at specific moments, allowing the demons of Andre Breton's

Mad Love

to shine through. The song ends with the sound of vomiting, an appropriately visceral, physical way of dispelling the demons, punctuating a night of excess and intoxication.

In the years following the release of *LSD*, Coil's music began to extend in different directions, focusing on minimal, experimental and ambient soundscapes - the cosmic explorations of *Astral Disaster*

, the pagan folk rituals of the Solstice/Equinox EPs, the electro-acoustic art songs of the *Musick To Play In The Dark* albums.

Love's Secret Domain

is therefore the turning point, the moment when Coil shed the last vestiges of industrial culture, and became the restless cartographers of their own aesthetic universe. In the process, they created a work of art that, even two decades later, still sounds dangerously on the verge.