

Essential Listen: Slint's "Spiderland"

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For this installment of Essential Listen, I offer Slint's 1991 landmark second album "Spiderland." Recently re-issued, this album has gotten a lot of additional media attention over the past few months, and rightfully so as it was largely overlooked at the time of its original release and yet has come to be a regular on many a "List of Greatest Albums."

Stylistically, it is like nothing that had come before it. It can be said to be similar to contemporary hardcore punk and alternative bands of that time like The Pixies or Fugazi, but it has such a transcendental and stunning quality to it that it can only be compared to an art rock band like The Velvet Underground's strong emphasis on creating something, though inspired by past music, more for the ultimate goal of uniqueness, strongly influenced by deeply held artistic ideals.

As one of the most recognized examples of early math rock, it can be best compared to a complex mixture between groups the Big Black and King Crimson, which, if you don't know either of them, King Crimson being figure-heads of largely jazz influenced progressive rock of the 1960s and 1970s and Big Black being an experimental- or post-punk band started in the early 80s that focused mostly on writing songs whose lyrics and general attitude were angst and aggression driven and tested cultural boundaries and whose music was analogously both terrifyingly isolating and profoundly inspired.

The first track, "Breadcrumb Trails" begins a motif of lyrical storytelling with subdued narration accompanied by a repetitive rhythm of hushed guitar riffs, followed by dramatic, whaling and unsteady guitars with screamed lyrics that become more metaphorical rather than narrative. The guitar riff style very interesting/unusual if you are not use to this sort of music with a structure very similar to the song "The Gift" by here-to-fore mentioned The Velvet Underground: an eight-

minute short story told with background music.

Next is the track "Nosferatu man," characterized by darker, more forceful, and more determined whining, incoherent guitar riffs, with more symbolic lyrics said more pas-



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sionately. The chorus riffs continue the power, keeping a lasting determination and containing a dimension looming danger that reflects well on the lyrics.

"Don, Amen," opening subtly and engagingly with the line, "Don stepped outside," continuing the storytelling of the first

track only this time, in third person, with less aggressive guitar riffs in background until chorus, which comes on slowly, and this time, storytelling doesn't stop, but gets more robust. This music goes from riffing to increasingly vigorous strumming and the vocals in a

typical music with less Math Rock influence and a constant 8/4 tempo you can tap your foot to and lyrics actually sung rather than spoken. A more comforting rather than ominous song is created, which can best be described as an absolutely perfect song to be featured in a film score or soundtrack.

The next song "For dinner..." is an instrumental piece which fluctuates quite randomly, getting barely audible to immediately louder, then softer. As if bipolar, the music sometimes loudens to its goal, and other times, the guitar struggles to rise and ends up falling back down again. A song characterized by strumming of a type slow, artistic, interesting, and most importantly, unique but also not particularly skill intensive. All the emotion that is displayed on this track is implicit, but it still manages to convey it well, and though definitely more in the punk rock aesthetic, the music resembles progressive rock done by bands such as King Crimson or Soft Machine quite well.

The final track "Good Morning Captain" proceeds to tear down the kinder tones of the past two songs returning to an emphasis on passion with both lyrics and music sharing an unsympathetic, mocking feeling. This song's style seems to be an amalgamation of the past styles with a riff and strum mixture and a chorus fully overdrive and powerful lyrical storytelling, but perhaps darker and more violent. The story is, similar to "Don, Amen," personal and emotional, but much more tragic; one can tell that something is finally happening; all that looming danger is finally being realized. The final lyrics the probably the most striking part of an already gripping album: Whispered lines such as "I'm sorry" and "I'll make it up to you," followed by screaming of the phrase "I'll miss you," backed by the heaviest chorus yet, before the album simply ends on that exacerbated tone, leaving the listener to feel like they have had a truly moving experience.

"Strandline" premieres at A Red Orchid Theatre

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A Red Orchid Theatre opened its 2014-2015 season this week with a U.S. World Premier of "Strandline," by Abbie Spallen. The story takes place in Northern Ireland, where, on the night of her stepdaughter's wedding, Mairin's husband drowns. Unfortunately, this intriguing beginning only unravels into story as convolutedly polluted as the environment which Mairin passionately defends, rendering the production an incoherent disappointment despite its actresses' fine acting.

Although the play opens on Triona's wedding night, the play continues until one month later, when Mairin is preparing to hold a memorial for the deceased. At Mairin's request, those who witnessed her husband's

drowning – Eileen, Clodagh, and Triona – stay the night; although the reason for this request is never clarified, since they are apparently not her "friends." In fact, they are and remain exceptionally indifferent to her and her sorrow throughout the play – including Triona, who displays a shocking lack of feeling for her father's death.

What actually transpires over the course of the evening is hard to relate concisely – which reflects its loose and over-complicated storytelling. As many of the themes echo Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People" – environmental concern, small-town small-mindedness, moral integrity –, it is not unlikely that this was an influence upon Ms. Spallen. However, any "moral drama" Ms. Spallen may have sought to devise is defeated by her predominant attention to the more emotive themes of

friendship, death, and grief, which she fails to weave into the moral theme of the plot, rendering thematic threads dangling in the audience's mind.

Moreover, while the play is described as turning "a sharp eye on small-town social and economic realities," those realities fail to sink to an emotional depth for the audience because their history is never played out before us but rather merely given in tedious, expository dialogue. This ultimately weakens the dramatic effect of Mairin's moral decline when she chooses her "public image" over her environmental advocacy (making her the foil to Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann, who remains upright in the face of social ostracism).

Fortunately, the actresses' performances made the production interesting to watch. Kristen Fitzgerald, who plays Mairin,

is able to captivate just by the way she listens engagingly to the other actors. Natalie West, who plays Eileen, does an incredible job embodying the idiosyncratic movements and speech of her dumpy, alcoholic character. Additionally, Dado, who plays Clodagh, does a nice job of owning her character's language, which seemed difficult to me because her monologues were largely insubstantial (and too long).

If the skill and work invested in the design and acting were more reflected in the script, this might have been a compelling play. However, as it is, the dramatic impact of the story is diminished by the writing's loose storytelling.

"Strandline" plays through December 7 at "A Red Orchid Theatre, 1531 N. Wells St."

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