

The Hypnagogue Archives, 2005-2008

Abandoned Toys, The Witch's Garden

Slow-moving and lovely, *The Witch's Garden*, the debut CD from Abandoned Toys (aka Brett Branning) comes on at first like a New Age piano album and then quietly sprouts tendrils of intriguing electronic treatments to weave depth, texture and color into each piece. As it moves forward, *Garden* easily blends a western classical feel (to quote the composer) with unobtrusive electronic atmospheres and vocals in pieces that drip with drama and gothic airs. Branning's piano style is clearly the star here, gentle, sophisticated playing that forms a bed for the other elements to rest easily upon. Truth be told, I have to imagine that a CD of Branning's solo piano ruminations would be a worthwhile listen as well. But there's more here—mournful strings and distant percussion, whispers of sound at the periphery of hearing, a sense of grim secrets long held close, all administered by a tender compositional hand. *The Witch's Garden* is a very good low-volume listen, preferably under dim lighting and with a glass of blood-red wine close at hand, but also has enough going on in the background to make it doubly interesting in headphones.

Available from the Abandoned Toys web site or Mythical Records.

Rudy Adrian, Moonwater

For pure, completely immersive ambient flow, it doesn't get much better than Rudy Adrian's unspeakably beautiful CD, *Moonwater*. Soft, consistently warm and fluid, *Moonwater* drifts through landscapes draped in calming twilight and built in quiet melodies. At low volumes, it's soothing; in headphones, it's astounding. Adrian constructs gossamer layers of sound and balances them steadily one atop the next, each arriving slowly and precisely, each new step a perfect complement to what's come before. What makes it more interesting is that Adrian has crafted this superb work using just one old synthesizer, a Yamaha SY77, as its foundation. Particularly effective are the two closing tracks, "Three Views of a Japanese Garden" parts 2 and 3. Part 2 features wordless chanting augmenting a meditative melody while stray but well-placed piano notes fall like raindrops onto lotus leaves. Part 3 floats with Zen-like grace, its component chords fading slowly until all that is left is a rising string melody, drifting quietly away toward dawn.

Deeply relaxing and expertly crafted, *Moonwater* is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available at Lotuspik.

A Thousand Years, A Thousand Years

I'd be hard pressed to categorize this CD under the label of "ambient," as the artist does. Although *A Thousand Years* (secret identity Greg Pearson) works with some soft electronic textures, most of the songs here infuse the electronica with a solid pop sensibility that truly lends it more character. You don't often get "hooks" in ambient music, but they're here. "Land of the Living" is an uptempo guitar piece that leads nicely into the more understated (and ambient) "Angel Overcome." And "See the Spirits" is practically begging to be rounded out with lyrics that would net it some radio airplay. This debut CD is an excellent piece of guitar instrumental tunes cradled in a strong understanding of ambient tones.

Check it out at Horizon Recordings.

Aloof Proof, Piano Text

Going into it, I was unaware of the history and mystery that surrounds both the artist known as Aloof Proof and the CD *Piano Text*. Infracation Records has re-released this duet of long-form ambient piano

pieces which apparently had achieved something of a legend/cult status following its initial appearance. And from the number of listens I've given it since I first received it and the number of times I have gladly gone back to it, I understand why. This is classic-style ambient, with slowly played piano notes allowed to fade lazily across an expanse of echo, the sounds blending as they drift backward, becoming something new and more whole with each moment. Michel Fibe, the man behind Aloof Proof, plays with unhurried grace and precise construction, expertly allowing the skeins of his composition to weave themselves together. Intermittent gatherings of background sounds bolster the piano like well-formed subplots to the sonic narrative. Piano Text quickly establishes itself as a veritably perfect example of an ambient CD--able to allow the listener to exist quietly within the space it creates, passively absorbing the feelings and sensations that arise from its emotive content, yet capable at any given moment of being deeply scrutinized and never found wanting. Set on repeat play, this is a disk that will slowly but surely change the energies of the space it occupies, always tending toward a very relaxed state and gently encouraging more listens. Piano Text is not only a classic of the genre; it is also a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD. Available from Infracion Records.

Alpha Wave Movement, A Distant Signal and Cosmology

Probably the best thing I could do in this review is to tell you to stop reading right now and just buy these CDs. You'd thank me, really. Because Alpha Wave Movement (secret identity: Gregory Kyryluk) has turned out a pair of eminently listenable pieces that neatly combine spacemusic, chill, and solid electronic music.

A Distant Signal is the mellower of the two, a comfortable ride through space made funky with smooth beats laid under weightless synth pads and melodies laden with velvety hooks. It glides back and forth between soothing drifts and impulse-drive sequencer moments. Standout tracks include "A Place of Peace," which epitomizes the album's drift-to-groove style, and the gentle "Portal Full of Stars," which ushers in the final few tracks of the album, where AWM gives the listener a dose of suspended-animation chill-out. And if I may say so myself, "Requiem for C.S." should be making e-music playlists everywhere.

The tunes on Cosmology also vacillate between upbeat and downtempo, with a strong bend towards upbeat. It's an infectious piece of work that sounds at once familiar and fresh. I'd run out of ink trying to list the influences at work here. "Prologue Sequence," which opens the disk, offers a strong homage to mid-80s Tangerine Dream. It's Berlin School-style perfection, launched into space. The second and third tracks continue that feel before the album dips just slightly into three pieces that touch a little too closely on a mid-80s New Age-ish feel for my tastes. However, AWM recovers nicely and finishes off by offering the listener a comfy starcruiser seat for the voyage back into the spacemusic realm with the quietly lovely "Distant Edens." Order this CD at Groove Unlimited.

Alpha Wave Movement, The Regions Between

One of the benefits of the DIY mindset endemic to the ambient/electronic genre is that at any given moment an artist can reach into their back catalog, pull out older or unreleased material, fire it up on the computer, enhance it or clean it up or, in some cases, finish it in the first place, and release the results in a new package. Such is the case with the latest offering from Alpha Wave Movement, The Regions Between. AWM (aka Greg Kyryluk) has gathered work from 2001-2006 into an enjoyable suite of sequencer-motivated spacemusic with just the right amount of beat and funk. Kyryluk has dug

up some lovely gems this time out. "Nucleogenesis" takes off like a Tangerine Dream homage propelled by solid-fuel sequencer work. "Rubicon" moves in on a slow, repurposed 70's R&B love-song-inspired groove before picking up a bit of flavor from spacey sequencer trills and some chunky bass. "Desert Light" continues the low-and-slow feel through a short-but-calming journey. The highlight here comes with "Distant Nebula," 10 minutes of signature AWM deep-space drifts blended with a wealth of ear candy and subtle beats. These are always welcome journeys when you're riding with AWM, full of aural imagery and atmosphere. Things get organic with the closer, "Metamorphic Dawn," where hand drums usher in angelic chords touched with rumbling bass tones and a sense of unassisted flight.

I very much like that Kyryluk has taken the time to offer some liner notes on Regions... It's interesting to get the artist's perspective on what he's dusted off, what the inspiration was and, in many cases, what equipment was in the mix. All in all, a very good offering from Alpha Wave Movement and a superb addition to his catalog.

Available at CDBaby or through the AWM Web site.

Duglus Alun, Aggressive Meditation

When you get a lot of CDs gratis, many of them get a listen or two and then get used as coasters. For some reason, this CD continually rides that ragged edge: not enough to be put into heavy rotation, but not enough to toss out. The tunes here are a mixed bag, from drone-based synth washes to moody instrumentals, but nothing the genuinely sticks in the head. As a writer, I find myself thinking that many of these pieces would make good soundtrack music. Alun is quite strong at conjuring a mood or image through sound. And don't get me wrong--there are some good tracks here. "Rain on Bamboo" is a swirling, enveloping piece built on soothing Asian-style flute; "Up the Sacred Mountain" and "Opium Den" combine to form a sort of jazzy-meditative groove. Give Aggressive Meditation a listen or two—it might turn out to be more than a coaster.

CD available at CD Baby.

Aperus, Hinterland CD5

Prior to receiving this CD in the mail, I was unfamiliar with the work of Aperus (secret identity: Brian McWilliams). Having experienced his music, I fully intend to rectify that as soon as possible. Listening to these five cuts, culled from alternate takes and portions of songs from his full length CD, tumbleweed obfuscated by camera failure, has a simply narcotic effect--knowing what it's like leaves the listener needing more.

"Magnetism" opens the CD with uncomplicated piano melody and minimal electronic dressing, a piece lovely in its simplicity. We often talk about influences and cross-influences in ambient music; this is like genetically splicing George Winston and Brian Eno. It stands in nice contrast to the starker, percussion-driven tribalism of "Earth & Clay" and "Echo Canyon." The first rides in on a funky bass groove, while the latter slips into pure slow ambience with faint drums receding like night before dawn. The closing track, "Vanishing Terrain," pulls many of the elements of the other tracks together in a brooding, breathing piece that firmly underscores the idea that, yes, you need more Aperus.

There's only one mis-step here: "Kaskaskia Canyon." A solely atmospheric piece based on the sound of water dripping in a cave, it unfortunately (to these ears) sounded like it was recorded in a men's room...if you know what I'm saying.

But wait--there's more! Pop this enhanced disc into your CD-ROM and you'll find pictures and more music in MP3 format. You can check out the "experimental mix" of "Earth & Clay" and an edit of "All Good Things" from tumbleweed.

All in all, hinterland is either a fine introduction to the music of Aperus or a welcome addition to your Brian McWilliams/Remanence collection.

This CD is limited to 100 copies, and can be ordered online at AtmoWorks.

Aria 3 : Metamorphosis

The third installment of this opera/electronica crossover is a lovely addition to the Enigma-school canon. Kicking off with the soaring "Ombra Mai Fu" from Handel's "Serses," Aria 3 underscores classic vocals with a variety of styles from fairly standard house beats to reggae and jazz feels. The album hits its zenith with "Farewell," the closing to which, to these ears, sounds like a magnificent blend of the end of Mike Oldfield's "Northstar" and ELO's "Fire on High." There are two instrumental tracks here that, while nice enough, almost detract from the allure of the opera/groove pairing. Still, start to finish this is a very listenable album. One warning: I first listened to this CD while driving through New England in the fall—putting this on while driving will make you feel like you're in a high-end car commercial. And believe me, that's a good thing.

Arrocata, In the Distance

Performing as Arrocata, Robert Straub offers a tour of the physical and metaphysical vistas of his beloved southwestern American desert on *In the Distance*. This is an engaging, beautifully constructed work that eases along, unhurried, on textured drones that ripple like heat shimmer. The disk opens with the mysterious, somber touch of "Superstition Mountains," where the cry of a hawk pierces waking-breath drifts and a sparse drumbeat marks the cadence. The mystery continues into "The Lost Dutchman," which floats along nicely as the rhythm picks up. Blurred, lost radio voices call out briefly, intermittently. This track and the opener have a certain solidity, a corporeal aspect, that will be left behind as the disk moves downward into vaster spaces and a more drone-driven sensibility—the movement from real to surreal, from upper world to lower. That journey begins with "Weaver's Needle," ushered in on a rumbling drone and the sigh of desert wind before stretching out to reach for the secrets at horizon's edge. From there the journey curves inward on the minimalist tracks "Wandering Windows" and its even calmer followup, "Mogollon Rim"—which starts with a sudden upwelling bass thrum that then pares and smoothes to meditative, windsong quietude. This is the sound of sand shifting on a dune beneath a midnight breeze. Straub brings the disk full circle and returns the listener to the upper world on the closing track "Sedona." It echoes, appropriately, the feel of "Superstition Mountains" with grim chords evoking the solidity of rock and the beautifully barren desert landscape. Fading gently to its end, the disk practically begs for continuous play. *In the Distance* is a superb work that makes its journey fully and well. Straub uses a restrained hand and allows the pieces to move and grow organically with not so much as a bump in the path to impede the flow. Arrocata's *In the Distance* is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Dwight Ashley, Discrete Carbon

In his liner notes, Dwight Ashley explains that he was somewhat reluctant to release the songs on *Discrete Carbon* to the public because he felt they were personal--"a tension release." Let's all be glad he changed his mind. *Discrete Carbon* is elegant, challenging, and superbly crafted. Ashley spans a range from soft, melodic pieces to lazy sine-wave drones to harsh, compelling work that even its

creator questions "whether it truly qualifie[s] as music."

Case in point: the third track, "Katalepsis." Here Ashley submerges a slow-moving, almost mournful synth melody beneath a wave of unrelenting static. Musically it is a truly relaxing piece, and while the mind and soul recognize that, the nearly intrusive barrage of shifting white noise forces a constant analysis of whether or not it belongs and what it actually adds. It is, without question, effective--as are all of Ashley's sonic choices. Every track has embedded elements that force the listener to take notice, along with subtler nuances that enrich the experience.

Throughout this CD, Ashley artistically intertwines music and non-music in an intoxicating, narcotic blend that commands deeper listening for fuller appreciation. It is dark, moody, and relentless in both its difficult complexity and its shadowy beauty. If you are up to the challenge and can approach composition with an open mind, Discrete Carbon will not disappoint.

For more, visit Dwight Ashely's Web site.

Dwight Ashley, Four

Following up on last year's excellent solo release, Discrete Carbon, Dwight Ashley returns with Four, a guided tour of the raw, grim places at the edge of musicality. With each new album--indeed, each new piece--Ashely proves himself a master of stark beauty. Four is a smooth, slow-moving body of work that reaches down into the hidden places in your psyche and pulls something out. There is no passive listening here; every piece pulls the listener down and in. "Machina ex deus" starts with a rasping, trapped-animal snarl but wends its way into fluidity; "Stranded II" is painted in perfect hues of unease and worry but stays engaging with its tonal beauty; "The Art of Standing" brings a sort of dark Zen sensation, the feeling of being not entirely alone in your mental quietude; and "The Mighty Fallen Rust in the Sun" is a splendid balance of menace and majesty set on breathy drones and ripples of low chords.

I'm consistently amazed by Ashley's ability to create music that feels intensely personal while at the same time carrying a distinct sense of distance. It's like standing back, unseen, and watching a painter cry as he creates.

A superb second effort from Ashley, one that gets a lot of replay.

Available from Nepenthe Music.

Dwight Ashley, Ataxia

In the liner notes to his new release, "Ataxia," Dwight Ashley wonders if its asking too much for someone to sit through this sort of material without breaking something. True, "Ataxia" is dark--as in very--and at times aggressive, but that's what you end up with when you take the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina as a muse. The upside of such inspiration is that, as with all of Ashley's previous releases, the depth of emotion, however grim, and the layers of sound are the reward for a sometimes gritty listening experience.

This is classic-style ambient, more sensation and evocation than outright musicality. It very quickly moves into the realm of immersive music, where one piece flows with precise ease into the next with no real breaks to pull the listener up from its depths. Thus, "Ataxia" is the sort of CD that has to be

considered as a whole. And the whole is signature Ashley, a glimpse inside the artist that combines soft and understated floating melodies with rough-hewn, sometimes industrial-tinged backdrops and a hearty dollop of dissonance.

As a personal note, I love that every Ashley CD ends with a short solo piano piece that seems utterly detached from the rest of the work. It's like a palate-cleansing sonic sorbet after the main course.

So is Ashley correct? Is it too much to ask for listeners to sit through "Ataxia"? No. But asking them to not keep going back to it to explore its depths? That would be asking too much.

Ataxia is available from Nepenthe Music
Also visit Dwight Ashley's Web site

Dwight Ashley, Watermelon Sugar

In the liner notes for his first solo release, *Discrete Carbon*, Dwight Ashley made mention of a deeply personal unreleased song collection titled *Watermelon Sugar*. I recall thinking at the time that the way in which Ashley wrote about it was somewhat reverential. As with almost all of his work, he spoke of being tenuous about releasing it. It existed, but he wasn't sure that it would ever exist publicly. Now *Watermelon Sugar* has arrived, and I can say that for me, it was worth the wait. Comparatively speaking, *Watermelon Sugar* is for the most part Ashley's most readily accessible solo work to date. This is not to say that the disk lacks the somber, gray-palette depths that are the signature of his previous outings and, indeed, the allure of his work. Melancholy is in full dark bloom here. Every piece is like a slow, contemplative walk on a foggy morning, senses heightened and the veil between worlds slightly parted. But it's not nearly as grim and challenging a listen as his previous release, *Ataxia*. There's more of a sense of music being music, as opposed to a culled collection of odd atmospherics standing in for music—the exception being the haunting "Hallways & Corridors," which scrapes its way through with sirens, wailing babies, and a relentless bass drone, all to perfectly executed effect. But the majority of the works here are more subtle but certainly not lacking in character. The opener, "He Let It Go," flows along like a good memory, quiet, deep and lovely; the brief and almost tentative song of "Gossamer Sea"; the slow-motion drawn-out drift of "White China"; or "Recalling '76," where a languid piano melody sighs over long, quiet chords and touches of dissonant background instruments. There's the appropriately solemn, trumpet-driven "Taps," which brings to mind early Mark Isham; the renewal of an early version of Ashley's duet with Tim Story, "Jealous Entropy No. 1"; the grimly dramatic urgency of "Recalcitrant Cello"; and the stunningly beautiful, if entirely too short, "Chorea," a sonic "amen" to close the disk. As always, nothing is straightforward with Dwight Ashley. Even the most seemingly simple or untouched of melodies, when listened to more closely, have a rich backdrop constructed of sounds that seem at times intent on undermining their host. What's amazing is that they come through as constructive rather than destructive. The title track is the best example of this approach to music—careful and architectural on the one hand, anarchistic and cobbled together on the other. And always, always effective musically. *Watermelon Sugar* is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available from Nepenthe Music.

Ashley & Story, Standing and Falling

The first word that comes to mind when considering Ashley & Story's latest release, *Standing + Falling*, is "grace." Not just the grace of the music itself, although it does move with unhurried presence

and the rhythm of calm breath. Rather, it's the CD taken as a whole—the construction of each individual piece, the play of the elements within each, and the relationship between tracks—that evokes the overarching sense of grace. The disc opens with the slow dance of "Obstinato," where a gentle strings-feel melody meets electronic twiddling, setting the tonev□

a shifting synth sweep.

The disk concludes with the "Text" portion—several experiments using “word modules” to craft sonic moments out of repeated phrases. While marginally interesting in their own way, they add nothing to the disk. In fact, they’re a bit of a letdown after the pleasant tour of the Drawings, coming off as something of an afterthought. For the first seven tracks of the disk, however, Kucharz is once again spot on.

Available from International Audiochrome.

Brannan Lane, Sampler CD

Budding ambient/electronic artists, pay attention. Brannan Lane is showing you how to wisely broaden your audience. In the world of electronic music, where big-label deals border on mythical and self-distribution and word-of-mouth are a musician's best friends, what could possibly work better to introduce yourself to a new audience than to load a dozen of your richest pieces onto a CD and hand it out for three dollars?

This is precisely what Lane has done with his new Sampler CD offered through his Web site at www.brannanlane.com. Originally offered to radio stations, the disc culls tracks from seven Lane recordings and truly shows the artist's range and depth. From the deep, soul-resonating bass drones that open the disc ("Mesosphere") to the soft elemental murmurings of "The Relaxing Effects of Water" at the end, this is a collection that grabs hold early and doesn't let go. The sensations range from innerspace floatation to welcome immersion in darkness. From soothing to challenging. Levels of sound gently layer one atop the other, paying dividends to the careful listener over and above what can be found from hearing just the lusciously crafted surface.

Perhaps the best cuts (for this reviewer) come from Lane's CD "The Lost Caverns of Thera." These pieces offer a downward stairway for braver listeners—"Thera" being Greek for "fear." These soundworlds are at once demanding, immersive, and exhilarating.

I initially ordered the Sampler for three reasons: 1) It was three bucks, 2) I'm savagely curious about electronic music, especially from artists with whom I'm unfamiliar, and 3) I'm notoriously cheap. But Brannan Lane's ploy has worked on me. The Sampler introduced me to his considerable talent and, thanks to the list of recordings he cleverly packs along with the disc, I'm looking at ordering quite a bit more. Pick up this CD and you will, too.

Brannan Lane, Piano Dreams and Nightscapes

Opening like a dark tribute to Eno's "Music for Airports," with a sparse, sustain-intensive piano melody over quiet synth work, this CD soon shows its true Lane colors and beauty. The two opening tracks—the Piano Dreams—move languidly along like subtle morning fog. In the next two—the Fallen Nightscapes—the piano drops away to a rich, atmospheric drift with delightful depth of sound. The first of the two Moonlit Reflections pieces sounds like an homage to the "healing piano" music of Steve Halpern in the 80s, with evocative, stylish electronic piano. The second goes darker and deeper with a tinge of tribal percussion. With "Daze Gone By," Lane eases the CD to a close with a bit of soft darkness. This is a perfect relaxation CD, and a delight for deep listening.

Brannan Lane, Distant Friends

Brannan Lane has nice friends. They chip in to help him sculpt astounding soundworlds that range from slow-moving drifts through quiet places to dark, challenging landscapes rich with musical meance. Six of those friends have been gathered on this CD, which Lane calls "a collection of collaborations."

The CD opens with the help of the legendary vidna Obmana. Together Lane and Obmana set the tone with a sinuous drift lightly tinged with darkness. Zero Ohms steps in with some urban sound samples and hand that moves from dark to light before handing the reins over to Amir Baghiri. This pairing creates a familiar Lane-style soundworld, rife with distant, echoey percussion, and water-in-a-cave ambience. It is gorgeously grim and mysterious.

The fourth track, "Unforgotten Dreams" with Robert Carty, is an ambient pearl. Lustrous, deep, and slow, it is truly the highlight of the CD. Late in this 16-minute track, thunder rolls, and somehow it's a perfect touch. This is music to dwell within.

Biff Johnson lends his hand to the next track, a spacemusic-style journey redolent with a sense of distance, thunderous chords, and a ramjet/stellar wind synth pad rush pushing it all along..

"Weeping Willow," with Silvercord, is another of the highlights of the CD, and a perfect closing track. From under a shifting white-noise drone of countless layers, guitar melodies rise up, crest the surface and fade back below again. Catches of sound come up like old echoes for an uncertain stay. And all the while, the drone mutates gently, perfectly.

Kudos to Lane for seamlessly melding the tracks together. There's no discernible break between songs. In fact, if you didn't know it was a group of collaborations, there'd be no reason to suspect it wasn't simply Lane himself. With all these tracks previously unreleased, this CD makes a great introduction to both Lane and some of the best names in the ambient biz today.

Brannan Lane and Zero Ohms, Soundfall to the Infinite

To me, the earmark of a good--or even classic--ambient recording is its ability to be both there and not there at the same time. Good ambient music takes on a sort of symbiosis with the listener; it meshes fluidly with breathing and the heartbeat and, in part, simply exists quietly and inobtrusively within the same space. At the same time, it selects moments where it nudges itself to the forefront of the relaxed mind to make its presence known and to afford the listener more cognizant glimpses of its own beauty. Above all, to be a classic recording, it must do so with simple ease and grace.

Soundfall to the Infinite is and does exactly that. Moving with perfect grace through three two-song segments, Soundfall is a glorious exercise in minimalistic beauty. Lane's keyboards and sound processing form a lush landscape over which float Ohms' flutes and wind synths. The music takes its time in developing, moving forward organically, the elements shifting constantly. Here, it's Lane taking the forefront; there, Ohms' breathwork slides forward. It is, like the music's meshing with the listener, a perfect symbiosis.

What works particularly well here is that both artist, to some degree, step away from the stylistic choices that characterize their other work--Lane from his beloved dark, cavernous and shadow-filled soundworlds, and Ohms from challenging the listener with practiced dissonance and edgy flute work. Rather, the two here combine in marvelous subtlety.

The middle section of the CD, the two pieces that comprise "Endless Land of Blue Mist," is perhaps the best of it. This is the point where you'll start to notice that you've settled into a rhythm with the piece--and then quietly and happily sink back into it. "Soundfall," the fifth track, is pure meditative bliss, with a simple, repeating motif anchoring an airy synth backdrop.

Relaxing, delightful, and, from an ambient standpoint, virtually without flaws, Soundfall to the Infinite is most decidedly a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Brannan Lane and Ashera, Sextant

Given the title, cover art, song titles, and overall feel of Brannan Lane and Ashera's Sextant, a review with a particularly nautical theme is pretty much unavoidable. So be it. But given Lane's penchant for and skill in carving complex, disturbingly evocative, yet uncannily beautiful soundworlds, it's fair to say that this sonic journey is no pleasure cruise--which isn't to say it's not pleasing. Indeed, it's a must-listen.

This is a trip over dark, uncertain water to a strange place that exists on no known map. There is a sense of constant cool fog filled with whispers and sails billowing under phantom winds. The ship seems to know the way--or perhaps there is no way at all, and the only thing one can do is wait.

With keyboards and midi guitars, Lane and Ashera (secret identity: Anthony Wright) sculpt this journey in hues of peace and mystery. Breathly synth work provides a delicate, calming base that the duo drape in somber tones and atmospheric accents that become the half-seen landscape on the trip. Each of the five pieces is rich, fully developed, and packed with imagery. "A Very Large Sail" appropriately starts the CD, billowing under those demon winds. Lane and Ashera set their course's tone with this long, densely packed piece, ripe with mystery and punctuated with swells of expectancy. "Old Ghost Ship" approaches with a distinct sense of wonder and just an air of trepidation. Still, it fascinates in its passing. Deep atmospheric here lend a nice supernatural tint as the piece moves in and out of an exploration of darkness. "Budd's Boat" continues the mystery and ups the ante on edginess, perfectly marking the halfway point of the trip. On the title track and the closer, "The Navigator," the overall mood becomes lighter, with the uncertainty moving to the edges, to the distance, and a sense of relieved wonder rises from the musical narrative. With the very last moment of the CD it becomes clear that the darkness has passed and the voyage has been well worth it--as has been the time spent listening to Sextant.

This is a CD that will get a lot of repeat play, and each time the journey will offer more. As I sat down to write this review, I found that I simply had to listen to this album to continue to discover its depth, intensity, and remarkable beauty.

There is a small, unobtrusive note on the inside cover that suggests playing this CD at a lowered volume. I would agree--but only after you've gone through it at least once at a higher volume and with headphones on so that you can better appreciate what these two talented composers have put together here.

Sextant is available at brannanlane.com.

Laurel, Laurel

A few years ago I was driving from Chicago to Boston with a friend. As we passed through northern Ohio, I looked out the window and was surprised to see how lovely it was. Surprised, because there really wasn't anything there that made it lovely. But in that lack of some indefinable thing, in that lack of anything outstandingly noticeable about the landscape, there was beauty. I feel the same way about Laurel's debut CD. There's something here, and I know it's pretty nice, but it stems from the fact that there's not much of anything here.

The music here is soft and solid; the beats that drift in and out lean toward infectious. But the music tends to fade rather than internalize, and it's only the well-done nuances--some twangy guitar here, a horn sample there--that make the listener take any real notice. Still, as genuinely ambient music--ambient as in, "Oh, there IS music playing"--this CD is a pretty good listen.

Lena, Alchemy of Fingers and Dark

The alchemy referred to in the title of this disk is not cellist Lena's work on her instrument of choice, but also to the mutative and adaptive remix experiments performed on it by Hypnos' own M. Griffin and the duo known as Austere. The result is a suite of dense, often grim and challenging drone-pieces of a certain dark elegance. It's not an easy listen by any means—surely by design—but it's definitely intriguing. The CD single comprises two tracks from Lena's upcoming disc, *Extended Gestures for Cello*, and four remixes. On their own, the title track and "Crowdmurmurs, peopletalk" make superb use of the artist's haunting chords and the metallic tang of bow on strings. For me it took some getting used to and it's something that needs to be tried more than once to appreciate--a certain grimness of mood might also help. As for the mixes: Griffin's "XXX Remix" of the title track swirls and buzzes through your head like a dream you can't wake from while adding palpable-if-not-frightening depth and dimension. He goes spacier and airier on the subtly shimmering "Subterranean Conversation" mix of the track "Crowdmurmurs, peopletalk." Austere's "Gold into Lead Demix" starts out embracing the metallic rasp of the cello, then draws it to a softer place where choral voices drone and chant hypnotically as the manipulated cello draws spirals in the background air. The highlight of the disk is the radically altered "Mermers (Oh My! Oh Why!) Demix" by The Mystifying Oracle (an Austere moniker). Taking its cue from a spoken-word snippet by Aldous Huxley on "moving from symmetry to asymmetry," the piece makes the shift—abruptly when it does—from a quietly respectful reworking of Lena's composition to an intriguing sonic equivalent of ADD. Beats rush in and out, clips start and restart, vocals spin and transmogrify. It's a stunning bit of work, perfectly administered, and a great closer.

Available from Hypnos

Lesiem, Auracle

I've long been a fan of Enigma-style music and I think Intencity is one of the best new labels out there, so I expected to enjoy this latest offering from Lesiem. Despite its featuring vocals by Maggie Reilly, whom I've loved since her work with Oldfield in the 80s, I just can't get into Auracle. It may be a case of "here we go again" and the whole Enigma thing is just played out, or it may be that the male vocals here seem forced and bombastic, plunked down heavily over fairly decent--again, if nothing new--arrangements. Once you've heard the opening track, "Humilitas," which was featured on the label's very good Spiritual Chillout compilation, you've pretty much heard the CD.

You can check out samples at the Intencity Web site.

Liquid Mind, Relax—A Liquid Mind Experience

Recording as Liquid Mind, Chuck Wild has been producing softly undulating, soporific electronic music aimed at the meditation-and-healing crowd since the early 90s. In this collection, Wild pulls together from previous releases a number of beautiful, slow and graceful pieces that ease the breathing, calm the mind and refresh the body. Wild calls his works “musical healthcare,” and not without good reason. A listen to this CD, whether with the immediacy and presence of headphones or just allowing it to fill a space quietly with low-volume repeat play, brings a very distinct calm and sense of oneness with the self. Long, deep-breath synth washes drift one over the other, unhurriedly and concerned only with your relaxation. One piece melts into the next, as they should, for a truly immersive journey. I must confess that prior to receiving this CD my only exposure to Liquid Mind was what I heard in the mix on the ambient/electronic digital cable radio channel—but even at that, it caught my ear and attention, so that I was very happy to get this CD to review. And now I need to experience more of the sedative, soft-crafted worlds of Liquid Mind. For those in need of very calming music or as an introduction into electronic/ambient music this Liquid Mind sampler would be a very wise choice.

Available at the Liquid Mind web site

Lopside, 37

Inspiration. It can come from just about anywhere. It's all a question of what you do with it when it comes. For example, Lopside (secret identity: Dean Hinds) gets a second-hand pager from a friend. It doesn't work well, and one day as voicemail leaves 37 bursts of electronic noise. Dean clearly had two choices: get angry and throw the foolish thing away, or record the sounds and use them as the basis for a sonically engaging and inventive CD.

Thankfully for us, Lopside went for the latter option and turned out “37,” an addictive blend of downtempo grooves, uptempo power, and electronic noise that is quite simply one of the best CDs I've heard in a long time.

Standout pieces here include the weirdly beautiful “to the point of obscurity” and its follow-up track, “a million pieces,” where Lopside exhibits his talent for effortlessly folding noise into melody and making them work together. Every track morphs at some point along the way, moving either from an easy flow to drum-driven noisefunk, or from beat-heavy and sharp to beatless and soft--and every time, the transition is organic, seamless, and effective. Hinds' genius with noise and sound elements are most strongly in effect on the title track, where many of the 37 sounds make a cameo, and on "when all of my favorite moments have ended," which will have you getting up to check the CD player before you realize how brilliantly the artist is using sharply cut sound samples and edging them into the beat.

On top of that, Lopside gets bonus points for naming his richly layered closing drone piece "titling instrumental tracks seems ridiculous."

I'm very pleased to name Lopside's 37 the first-ever Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD. Order it today at www.lopside.net.

Lopside, When You're Finally Through Being Responsible

I will confess to being something of a Lopside shill. I got hooked on Dean Hinds' style of sonic sculpture through his amazing work 37, was lucky enough to be sent his two previous works,

junedecember and decemberjune, and have been impatiently awaiting more ever since. Now *When You're Finally Through Being Responsible* is here, and it's certainly worth the wait. WYFTBR charges into your head with a blast of static, relentless drums and a melody pasted together in clipped vocal samples. Hinds' surgical hand comes immediately into play, turning swatches and snippets of noise into textural rhythmic elements. This is his specialty: finding the musical in non-music, forcing the listener to accept, undeniably, that all sound is inherently musical. WYFTBR is a series of exercises in sound distortion and manipulation with a keen eye toward keeping every track eminently and enjoyably listenable. Hinds unleashes a staggering array of sonic detritus here, stacked and layered and slammed together and melded with the drums, charging guitar, and broad synth pads. It's an exhilarating ride, start to finish, dense and hypnotic and rewarding. And well-paced, too. The first two tracks charge in hard; the third, "Finally," cools off considerably, loping along in downtempo stride while still pulling color from Hinds' palette of noisemusic across its 15-minute length. Its follow-up, "Through" (each track's name is one word of the title, in order) keeps things slow and strange, floating along on a bed of artfully twisted vocal samples. With "Being," the beat strides back in, then starts kicking things over with the help of some aggressive guitar. The closing track neatly lands in middle ground, as the beat stays but eases into a smooth groove to glide along with slightly becalmed guitar, voices, and keys. This pares down to a 2-minute long drone with indistinguishable voice beneath it, drawing a straight, fading line to the end of a superb disk from Lopside.

Available through CDBaby or at the Lopside Web site.

Tor Lundvall, Empty City

I was in St. Louis several years ago on a business trip. Early on a Sunday morning, I set out on a walk, partly to find breakfast and partly just to enjoy the city. Nothing was moving that morning. No one was on the streets. I turned a corner, and I saw something that to this day strikes me as very odd: a line of basketball hoops, set up in the middle of the street, stretching for three city blocks. No one playing, no one around. Just these abandoned hoops, waiting for something to happen. And that's the sort of image I get when I listen to Tor Lundvall's musical equivalent of a greyscale landscape, *Empty City*. Lundvall's work carries the feel of looking at something from a distance through a light fog. There's a certain indistinct nature to his low-volume, airy washes. His synth work moves like early morning wind, tinted with touches of industrial steam. *Empty City* vacillates neatly between dreamlike drifts and downtempo beats that feel gently spread out and unhurried. The sleepy beat-based work is some of Lundvall's best here, including "Running Late" and "Early Hours," my personal favorite,* and the title track. As it wends its way somnambulistically through shadowed, abandoned streets in half-waking moments, *Empty City* quietly works its way deeper into the listener's consciousness, making it superb for background or low-volume headphone play. A very good listen that gets better with closer attention and repeat plays.

Available from Strange Fortune.

*..and it's the fifth track.

Tor Lundvall, The Seasons Unfold (Sampler)

On this four-song offering, Lundvall presents another round of wispy, ethereal and marginally over-contemplative pieces in his "ghost ambient" style. The highlight of this short ride is "29," a sung piece that puts me in mind of the Gary Jules cover of "Mad World." Overall this disk is a 50-50 shot. "29" and the quavering, bass-pulsing "November's Fields" are engaging. The other two tracks, not as much.

That's nine good minutes out of fifteen.

Available from Strange Fortune.

John Lyell, Dimensions

On his first solo release, John Lyell crafts a solid, drifting piece of classic-style spacemusic that demands and rewards close listening. Riding on spacewind drifts with swatches of quiet beats, Lyell immerses the listener in a journey at once soothing and intriguing.

Dimensions is an easy, inobtrusive ride through familiar spacemusic landscapes. Lyell crafts and layers his sounds with an expert hand. The journey begins on an upbeat note with the opening track, "Of Space and Time," but then Lyell immediately cuts the engines and coasts into the beautiful drift of "DreamSpace" and from there, it's all interstellar chill. One of the highlights of this CD is the elegant, floating "Transport," which excels in its pure simplicity. Also worthy of note is the hypnotic flow of "DreamSpace Return," which again makes good use of Lyell's understanding of how to make the most of a minimal style.

While this trip may be reminiscent of others you've taken, it's one worth setting time aside for.

Available at lightyearproductions.net

Mark Mahoney & M. Peck, The Gallery of Subtle Smiles

The Wife of Hypnagogue obviously ends up listening to a lot of ambient and electronic music. She's made to sleep with it playing, it's there on car trips, and it drifts down the hallway at night while iTunes just quietly shuffles the collection. Every now and then the Wife of Hypnagogue will stop to comment on a piece, and the highest compliment she gives is, "This is nice"—which she had to say about Mark Mahoney and M. Peck's Gallery of Subtle Smiles. I have to agree. Blending vastly deep spacemusic overtones with sharp, melodic sequencer work, Mahoney and Peck craft a voyage that is by turns exhilarating and contemplative. And each track—each leg of the journey—is a stunningly realized electronic landscape constructed from the chemistry between the duo. I find myself at a genuine loss to try to describe the tracks in and of themselves, the elements are so rich and the music so immersive. The back-and-forth between Peck's washes and Mahoney's sequence work in the far-ranging opener, "Flight of the Nexxus Swan"; the mechanically rhythmic sensibilities of "Cosmic Visitation"; the dark intensity of "Follow the Swarm"; and the hypnotic pulse and flow of "Tin Cans and Tiny Cables." On this one, words are inadequate. It's simply amazing and just has to be experienced. Over and over. And over. It is most definitely a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available at the Limited Wave web site.

Manitou, All Points North

My first exposure to the sensations evoked by Manitou's All Points North came when I was uploading the disk to iTunes. I started the load and left the room. After a bit, the computer just started playing the disk. When I returned to my office I walked through the doorway and into a sort of warm mist of sound that filled the room, wrapped around me and stopped me in my tracks. I simply had to stand there and listen, and the first thing that came to mind was, "Yes, I'm going to like this a lot." And I do. Constructed in what amounts to 19 snapshots of his Detroit environs, Manitou presents a slideshow of

quiet, understated sound-portraits that calmly draw an emotive response from the listener. Each brief track is densely packed with merging, layered sounds that twist together to create ultrasubtle rhythms and glacial-drift melodies. This is a CD designed for continuous, low-level play as it ripples like a warm, unintrusive current through the space, carving its pictures in the air before you. Even in headphones this disk shines when played quietly. It is almost unnaturally soothing while at the same time being a compelling listen.

Two other tangential things need to be called out here. First, Manitou is in the running for coming up with the all-time best track names, my personal favorites being "Snowy Night Riding the Peoplemover" and "Things Are Different Now But the Street Signs Haven't Changed." Second, Matt Borghi, through his company The Hand Work Press, has developed gorgeously simple packaging for Slo.Bor Media releases. Superb, sturdy paper stock that's a breeze to open and close, folding elegantly in on itself, with a nice handfeel. Original, and it really adds to the experience of receiving the CD.

For all these reasons, Manitou's All Points North is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available from Slo.Bor Media.

Mara's Torment

I've been fighting for a while now to encapsulate the pleasure of listening to the eponymous 10-year retrospective from Mara's Torment (Rik Maclean) into a review. Let me start by saying this is most certainly a must-have disk. Maclean pulls together a decade's worth of softly wrapped ear candy that blends downtempo calm with varied, silken ambient textures and soothing melodies. The ride is graceful and intriguing from track to track. "New Song" kicks the disk off in pure style with a low-key groove and a multitude of sonic critters crawling around behind its slow bassy twang. Especially effective here is a texture that sounds, for lack of a better description, like Maclean playing a bedspring run through light reverb. "Skin Irritant" moves slowly as a sigh, loaded with subtle sonic narrative. The lazily romantic vibraphone sounds on "The Eyes of Fairuza Balk" are lulling and beautiful as they punctuate the fluid melody coursing beneath them. There's so much to enjoy here...the inhale/exhale simplicity of "Sweep v.1"; the hushed, whistling drone of the wonderfully titled "I Name This Llama after You"; the spaceship-worthy electronic burble and gathered sounds blending artfully across "...down to go." In short, there's simply not a bad track to be found here. Maclean's a true artist, able to morph and adapt his style without ever feeling forced. Perfect in a shuffle, yet also feeling, in the way it so gracefully bridges styles and influences, like a shuffle all its own. This disk is certainly a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available at the Mara's Torment web site

Byron Metcalf, The Shaman's Heart

I recommend Byron Metcalf's "The Shaman's Heart." Backed by some Steve Roach soundwork, Metcalf once again opens a gateway to the lower world with an array of beautiful shamanic percussion. The uninterrupted 73-minute journey builds over the course of the first three tracks, with the beat of a frame drum stealthily increasing in pace. By the fourth track, the aptly titled "The Call for Total Surrender," it's journeying time. Drums, rattles, nature sounds (LOVE that Raven!), and the Roachian sworl underlying it all make for an atmosphere of pure deliverance. The upward return is made easier through the beauty of the next three tracks, that also include superb ocarina work from Roach. For meditative listening or background empowerment, "The Shaman's Heart" is a superb piece of work, and

an excellent addition to the Metcalf collection.

Available from Metcalf's Web site or the Steve Roach Web site.

Byron Metcalf, A Warning from the Elders

Go into Byron Metcalf's *A Warning from the Elders* prepared to treat it as the ceremony/journey it truly is. Metcalf's prayer to the earth, powered by shamanic drumming, didgeridoo, and overtone singing, carries the feel of the sacred from its opening moments. "Facing the Truth" is a breath-based devotion with the vocals and didge easing in over a rise-and-fall drone. Percussion moves in, shakers and drums, and the journey begins in earnest. A moment's pause, and then deep overtone singing ushers in the title track. Ominous yet warm, the resonance of the voices opens channels in your head and heart. A gong crashes intermittently and a driving beat slides under and in, the drums becoming stronger and more insistent. This is music to dance around the fire by, the force that opens the door between worlds. About halfway in, the track strips down to layer upon layer of nothing but drums for a few minutes—always a Metcalf highlight—and it's a sound to purely lose yourself in. The power continues in "Heart Warriors," which rides primarily on a breathy didge drone and the frame and hand drums, an effective tribal minimalism. Then the ritual soars into the thunderous energy of "Fire Passage," 15 minutes of core-shaking drumming, the high point of the disc and the focal point of the journey. This is the sound of your soul empowered, your spirit awakened, alert and energized. And then Metcalf brings the listener downward into the solemnly beautiful peace of "Earth Om—Sacred Resonance," where the breath cleanses, refreshes and refocuses. It provides time to reflect as body and soul rejoin. It is the reverent end-point to a journey both far and deep. Set aside an hour. Get somewhere dark and quiet. Focus on the music and your breathing. Release. See where *Warning* takes you. It's guaranteed to be an amazing trip. For its beauty and potency, *A Warning from the Elders* is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Methadrone, Retrogression

Let's say you're in a really good mood, but you don't want to be. You'd rather feel like, for example, maiming a puppy. After one listen to Methadrone's snarling, aggressive *Retrogression*, you'll be ready. Built around manhandling every possible sound out of two bass guitars, this industrial-tinged and at times mesmerizing CD drills its way into your appreciation--particularly if you're in the mood for grim and heavy. With song titles such as "Despondency", "Emotionless" and "Impurify", you know Methadrone won't be escorting you on a guided tour of Happy Valley. The title track stomps and rends its way through its eight minutes like a giant monster taking it out on Tokyo, and yet there's so much going on in the layers of sound that it becomes compelling. "Ebullient Drift" works a hypnotic tremolo riff into a sonic mantra chanted over a higher, dissonant voice on rhythm guitar. It's comparatively upbeat. "Impurify" charges in like an anthem for mob violence, driven by thundering programmed drums. Depending on your outlook, it's either a blessing or an oversight that the CD runs just 37 minutes. But in that 37 minutes, Methadrone packs in plenty of feeling--even if said feeling is often like getting kicked in the forehead. *Retrogression* is worth a listen, particularly since you can get it for six bucks at the band's Web site, but one important piece of advice: Don't listen to it while cleaning your gun.

Check it out at www.methadrone.com.

Kurt Michaels, Inner Worlds, part one

Fans of experimental music may want to check out Kurt Michaels' Inner Worlds, part one. On the other hand, those whose musical tastes don't range too far afield may not find it appealing. Michaels describes his work as "music by accident." Sometimes that's a good thing; other times, it's simply an accident. Inner Worlds seems at times to be looking for its identity. It wants to be ambient; it wants to be noise; it wants to have a jazz feel. In places it works quite well and there are bright moments, such as the tribally driven "Nightmare Crossing Over," the guitar-based "You Don't Say," and the first few minutes of the title track. Indeed, what I wanted to hear more of was Michaels' guitar work. On the whole, the mashed-together feel that dominates this work left me wondering if there was something I simply wasn't understanding.

Samples from the CD are available on Michaels' Web site, www.kurtmichaels.com. I'd suggest heading there first. For those folks who snack on avant-garde sensibilities, this may be just the thing you're looking for.

Kurt Michaels, Outer Worlds

I have to admit that I approached this disk with a slight touch of trepidation. A couple of years back I had reviewed Michaels' Inner Worlds, which wasn't much to my liking—too uneven and uber-avant for my tastes. But I noted in that review that "what I wanted to hear more of was Michaels' guitar work." Well, I got my wish. On Outer Worlds, it's Michaels' elegant and spirited guitar playing that takes the forefront. This is Michaels playing live with a backing band that seems to keep the more irreverent stuff at bay. They create a smooth base over which Michaels places intriguing sounds and melodies. It's an interesting blend of prog-inspired stylings with jazzy touches and a synth-driven backdrop. There are "experimental" moments along the way, of course. "Jade Princess" and "Hitch Hiker on Venus" take a bit too much of an off-road tack for me, especially after the more straightforward approach of the previous tracks. And in the 45-minute self-described magnum opus "One," some sections truly stretch into heavy improvisation and challenging tonality—though it must be said that for a piece of that length, "One" is by and large a very listenable journey, tinged with bits of suitable prog-rock bombast—especially at the outset—and an adventurous, exploratory sense. But the highlight of the disk overall (for me, anyway) is "Chucky," a funky-up, luscious take on Vince Guaraldi's "Charlie Brown Theme" that's entirely too short but a pleasure none the less. Overall, Outer Worlds is decidedly worth a listen—after all, it pretty much changed my mind about Kurt Michaels!

Available at Kurt Michaels' web site.

Midnight Sound Service, Aluminum Hymns

Midnight Sound Service's Aluminum Hymns moves deftly from a mix of soft noise and undertone dub to thick theta-wave drones that feel like they're taking up permanent residence in your subconscious mind. After the pulsing semi-rhythm of "Sinecure," the disk turns downward into a less tangible territory beginning with "Bodies Without Souls." From this point forward, softly liquid drones shift and ebb through a hypnotic soundmist. There's just enough of an electronically serrated sonic edge here to delineate a texture to each piece and yet it's also darkly soothing at the same time. This is the soundtrack of a waking dream, the landscape of the sub-lucid mind. It is disquiet amidst quiet, attentive relaxation. The three Hymns for Sleep are the absolute highlights here. The first, "(For the Air Conditioner)" wavers across a relaxing white-noise hiss as tiny glimpses of more solid sound dart around the periphery. This is deep-immersion dronework. "Part 2, (Inf.)", flattens the brainwaves further with six minutes of virtually unshifting but always deepening sound. And the closer, "Part 3 (Ice Again Again)" pairs a constant exhalation of arctic wind with a wavering drone to impart a sense

of being quite finally but comfortably adrift. Headphone listening is a must with Aluminum Hymns--it's a sure way to get as lost in the music as Midnight Sound Service intends you to.

Available from the Midnight Sound Service Web site.

Mikronesia, Iris or Comfortable Too

Mere moments after the first tender piano notes of Iris or Comfortable Too, you know you're headed off to interesting territory. The sound suddenly wavers like a disturbed reflection in water and swarms of electronic burble begin to move under the surface. From there it just gets more intricate as composer Michael McDermott takes Eno-esque ambient piano and tugs, tears, and twists it, submitting it to a host of electronic treatments to create new, unique aural textures. His manipulations run from the extreme to the subtle. In "No Rage" the notes are picked apart element by element and stitched back together in a rough quilt of beautiful, glitch-ridden imperfection. "(The) Lye Owl" is a slow and graceful piece built on carefully layered atmospherics with a distinctly dramatic tone. "Genre" and the closer, "Oil Vet," leave the piano mostly alone as McDermott applies a comparatively lighter hand to the effects and distortions, and his playing show itself as elegant and thoughtful. ("Genre" spends its last minute in a pleasant shower of effects.) "Nyca" throbs its way in like a subtly shifting waveform trying itself out over and over, changing ever so slightly on each pass. "Lebu" rolls in with a sparse, dark beauty, hard-played chords left to stand alone and drift apart in echo, the space between each becoming thick with expectancy.

Since I was compelled to listen to this CD three times straight through right from the get-go, it's definitely a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Mingo, The Once and Future World

A funny thing happened when I was listening to Mingo's freshman CD, the once and future world. After the first go-through, I gave myself a few minutes to think, then played it again, as I usually do. That listening round finished. I went to reach for another CD I'd received--but my hand stopped in mid-reach and instead, I re-started the Mingo. And in the middle of THAT listen, quite without my own volition, my hand slowly but assuredly crept toward the CD player and pressed "repeat." For the next hour or so, the headphones stayed on, and I remained gladly immersed in Mingo's once and future world.

According to the publicity that came with once and future world, Mingo is inspired by such luminaries as Roach and Numina. Heady pedigree, indeed, but across the course of this superbly deep CD, Mingo proves himself worthy of the comparison. This is spacemusic at heart, with all the sonic depth and sweeping synthwork that implies, but it's rooted in a solidly organic core thanks to the percussion elements in tracks such as "time turned new," "the infinite deep," and the amazing "hollow ascension." In fact, the combination of "ascension" and "infinite deep" makes up the best portion of this stunning CD, a breathtaking journey 15 minutes total in depth.

"ascension" begins with a shifting drone; a cave-echo drum brings in a slow, primitive beat, each strike on the drumhead fading into wind. On top of this, what sounds to these ears like a koto begins a simple melody. The image is that of a solitary monk, deep in mediation in some hidden grotto, playing inner music. "infinite deep" picks up the cave beat, intensifies and deepens it and adds a tactile sense of urgency. It's a very simple piece, but all the more elegant for it. Mingo then brings the listener back into the darker, cooler depths of his musicspace with "complex refraction." The title track, which closes

the CD, is another lush voyage into the ether, with rumbling chords reminiscent of Roach's "Magnificent Void" and touched with a quiet, peacefully mournful feel.

the once and future world is very much a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Find it at www.sonarweb.net and www.helmetroom.com.

Mingo, This Side of the Night

Don't pay attention to this album. Listen to it--a lot--but don't pay attention to it. That's how you'll get the most out of Mingo's newest release, *This Side of the Night*. On this CD Mingo has created a suite of pieces that do exactly what ambient music should do: meld smoothly into the background and your breathing, paint the very air with textures and hues, and every now and then make its presence known with a passage that forces you to perk up and take notice--which also makes you realize how the music has been affecting you. The CD opens with "the second sun," which spins its way, layer upon spiraling layer, to a rich, epic feel. It's a great introduction to the swirling drones form the foundation of many of the pieces here--it's part of the subtle hypnosis that makes it all work. Mingo also uses silken synth pads laid over simple, repeating melodies to superb effect, as in the funky-yet-calming "agelessly in gathering." There's a real sense of the artist at play here in the way in which Mingo seems to try just about every possible approach to ambient music. He has his lush drones, he has blip-and-drum pieces like "a thought to hold the sky," he has work that sounds analog in nature ("the hum of land's engine," which has the mark of being the distant cousin of Roach's *Possible Planet*), he has short work, he has deeper stuff--and together, it all works very nicely. It's my personal recommendation that you listen to this CD at lower volumes. On my first listen, I had the volume up too high and some of the higher-end synth textures seemed a bit much. But at lower volumes, I found them working more as attention-getters--those elements that pulled me up from the deeper reverie *This Side of the Night* creates when you're not paying attention to it.

Visit www.mingosphere.com, sonarweb.net or Mingo's myspace page.

Ministry of Inside Things, Contact Point

The CD opens with the meditative and aptly titled "Serenity Cove," a bit of expertly executed simplicity. As it fades, the music's direction darkens and sprouts harsher edges as it wends its way down into "Uncharted Isle," where grim chords writhe like unstill beasts. Toward the end, stronger, lighter chords and choral voices lift the piece toward the upbeat "Fortescue." van Zyl revs up the sequencer and Cohen embarks on an echo-tinged foray before handing it back to van Zyl for a Schulze-inspired cruise. It's the first truly Berlin-tinged piece on the CD, and it's perfect. And then we're headed down again, far down into the murky and slightly discomfoting exploration that is "River Dream." Meandering through a variety of psychotically sculpted bad-dream mindscapes, the piece builds on tortured guitar sounds, a repeating, taunting child's voice and an overall sense of chaos—but darkly engaging, well-orchestrated chaos. From there—and by now the course of this CD is quite clear—it's back to the brighter Berlin textures of "Nightscape." It opens with van Zyl's flute-like synth drifting over growing sequencer textures, and then Cohen's guitar charges to the forefront to exert its presence. From there, guitar and synth offer a superb give-and-take/call-and-echo exchange. The sound of spring peepers and a slow-motion sensibility usher in "The Red Sun Rises" as Contact Point ease back to a more meditative state to close the disk.

Overall, *Contact Point* is a good blend of MoIT's various inspirations, and another superb exploration

in the natural give-and-take chemistry between van Zyl and Cohen.

Available from Synkronos Records.

Ministry of Inside Things, Everlasting Moment

Listening to Ministry of Inside Things' live 2-disc "Everlasting Moment" reminds me of how and why I got hooked on electronic music in the first place. The combination of Chuck van Zyl's surgically precise sequencer work and Art Cohen's aggressively psychedelic guitar improvisations bring me back to the time when a high school friend took out his copy of Tangerine Dream's "Sorcerer" album and said, "You have to hear this."

The CD also captures the pure chemistry van Zyl and Cohen have developed over years of playing together. I'm not sure which parts are cogently developed and planned and which are left to spontaneously generate, but most of the tracks, particularly when Cohen's guitar is looping back on itself and echoing across space and following the starguide of van Zyl's synths, are rich with a raw-edged sense of grabbing inspiration and making a moment out of it. The 15-minute "Voyage for Guitar and Synth," the kinetic/manic power of "Neutron Flux," and the electric-animal slash and snarl of "Function Four" bring that sense in full force.

In addition there's a lot of deep-drift and electronic twiddle in MoIT's range, and it's showcased nicely here. The combination of "Induction Loop" and "Heatseeker" on disc one makes for a trippy, dark-side excursion; "Contour Adjustment" drips into the headphones like a lesson in subtle sound manipulation; "Dopamine Secret" explores the harsh, shadowy places in your psyche courtesy of Cohen's e-bow drawing electroshock crackle from his guitar. And then there's the closer, the Jerry Garcia tribute "Grateful." Totally unlike the rest of the CD, this piece is melodic and soft and lets Cohen show his roots and inspiration while van Zyl supports him quietly on the keys.

A must for lovers of classic Berlin School music.

Available from Synkronos Music.

Moongoat

Let's face it: when the first two tracks of a CD are entitled "For Drawing Toxins" and "I Love Chocolate Cockroaches," it's safe to bet you're not gearing up for a blithe stroll in a pastoral musical park. On their five-song offering, Australian duo Moongoat delve into the grim and strange corners of electronic music to present five intriguing pieces that range from subtle to challenging. Depending on how you like your ambient, you'll probably latch onto something here. Lovers of experimental music will glom onto "Cockroaches," largely comprised of a disturbingly processed childlike voice; "...And Let Go" is a more drift-based, soothing work. The best here is the closing track, "Making the Pain," which pairs layers of synth with a simple, repetitious beat for a nicely hypnotic flow.

Available as a download at Hidden Shoal Recordings.

My Majestic Star, Ideas Are the Answer

Initially I wasn't sure I was going to review My Majestic Star's Ideas Are the Answer. On the artist's label's web site the music was described as a sort of ambient/pop crossbreed, and we just don't do pop

here at Hypnagogue. Then I went to the site and took a taste of some of the samples—and then immediately downloaded the CD. Ideas... is a genre-straddling, guitar-based pleasure. Arguably not entirely “ambient,” the songs here go through enough processing and layering and are paired with enough classically ambient atmospherics such as crowd sounds and indeterminate voices that the end result belies the “pop” epithet laid on the CD. Yes, there are moments where beats and rhythms pop through and catchy guitar hooks lift up out of the wash, but they enhance rather than demean. Only “Keep the Keys From Me” really carves the edge of being a rock tune—and it’s a pretty damn fine one at that. Chris Mason’s playing is crisp, and his understanding of both genres shines. When Mason is in full-out ambient mode, his manner of combining airy guitar washes with more tangible melodies is superb. The highlight of this CD is “Half Measures,” where a poppy melody begins to dissolve beneath a rising tide of echo-laden conversation like the sound of a musician striving to be heard in a crowded bar. There’s an odd sense of the voices adding to the rhythm. The tune briefly gains strength and takes the forefront before inevitably fading once more. Again, not entirely ambient per se, but the clear sonic narrative lifts it above conventional fare. “You Greet Me with Night Laughter” pairs a twangy, looped guitar line with a distorted voice to create a disjointed, marginally dreamy feel. “A Lost City” is a beautifully serene portrait in piano and guitar, mildly melancholy at the edges. Overall, Ideas Are the Answer is a CD that leaves me looking forward to more from My Majestic Star.

Another superb offering from the folks at Hidden Shoal Records.

Noise Reduction Society, Leaving Venice

Constructed from a broad palette of sounds and washed in hues of feeling and texture, Leaving Venice is a superb collection of jazzy, trippy, downtempo pieces that beg for repeat play. James Hegarty, the mind behind NRS, is equally at home with cool ambient drifts as he is with beat-driven riffs, and both are here in equal and well-executed measure. Hegarty accentuates several tracks with samples of Kathryn Stieler's gorgeous voice like a sophisticated alien instrument whose music slips into the mind and takes command--and that command is to relax and enjoy. Perfect, lovely. Everything here is put together with an expert hand, and the depth of Hegarty's composition begs for and rewards attentive listening. Cuts such as "Blues for 03 GMT" and "Code" are potent and beautiful, the former for its cool funk, the latter for its slow subtlety. Steiler's voice is at its most astounding in "Shadow of Istanbul." (Once again, the playwright in me just begs to find a way to use some of NRS' music as a soundtrack--one of the highest compliments I can give!)

Head to the Noise Reduction Society Web site and snag a copy of Leaving Venice. And while you're there, look around the site; Hegarty's been involved in a number of very interesting theatrical and concert productions.

Numina, Sanctuary of Dreams

With Sanctuary of Dreams, Numina (secret identity: Jesse Sola) further solidifies his reputation as a respected force in the ambient music field. These 10 excursions are built on somber undertones, with ascendant synth pads giving a a decidedly "upward" feel to them. It's a very workable balance of light and dark, with some emphasis on dark. Numina's soundworlds are lush and magnificently layered, each a dream waiting to be interpreted. (Personal favorite: "In Loneliness, the Landscape Fades," which possesses a very mournful beauty.)

While the pieces here are individual--bypassing the tendency of many ambient artists these days to throw together one CD-length work--they move easily one to the next, creating an air of wholeness.

The disk practically begs to be played on "Repeat."

Without making any direct comparison, Sanctuary of Dreams is as good as anything you'll find out there by "big name" ambient artists. And with music like this consistently coming out of his studio, it won't be long before Numina is one of those names himself.

Numina, Symbiotic Spaces

With every new release, Numina (aka Jesse Sola) drives home the fact that he is constantly developing and redefining himself as a craftsman, and those efforts have made him a true mainstay of the electronic/ambient genre. And while this has been reinforced with each new CD going forward, his latest offering, a compilation of unreleased and rare tracks spanning the years from 2000-2007, shows us that he's been hard at it between releases, too. Symbiotic Spaces is a vivid journey through Numina's musical capabilities and his evolution as an artist—a trip through the various worlds he creates and the distinct sensations he evokes. The path alternates from the furthest depths of weightless interstellar space to the cool, dank darkness of primitive caverns. It encompasses our future in sweeping synths and electronic fabrications, and our past in shamanic, tribal rhythms conjuring basal, primordial responses. And the way in which they're stitched together verges at times on breathtaking. For example, the way in which the first disk winds down along a course that slides through the throbbing drum-pulse of "Aleph-Zero" into the sighing release of "Droncoil" and then onward to the ominous nocturnal atmospheres of "Cells." There's a lot to like here, in general of course, but also in small touches, such as the gamelan-style bells in "Space Lilt" or the hypnotic, repeating backdrop of "Moments in Darkness." Indeed, each track on the two disks is rich with character, texture and an eloquently stated, unique narrative. Sola is a superb sound-based storyteller.

Listening to this collection is a genuinely immersive experience. Each track slides readily and gracefully into the next with no perceptible break to the flow. Elements rise intermittently to the forefront, giving the listener a chance to refocus on Sola's masterful composition before being lulled back into the soundcurrent. Even the silence between tracks seems an integral part of the overall offering. These previously unreleased tracks are a true gift from Numina and a welcome addition to his canon.

Available from the Numina Web site.

Numina, Shift to the Ghost

In crafting a sonic narrative of the journey from life to afterlife, Numina has created a listening experience that is utterly immersive, a set of pieces that pull you in so deeply that trying to find adequate words for them once you've surfaced is difficult. This is signature Numina, moving as slowly as sleeping breath, elegant layers laid thickly upon layers with a certain and graceful hand. Sound textures course across the skin and into the spirit, coaxing the listener with warmth, beauty and imagery. This is the sound of the soul departing, and the sense of the journey itself. Rhythms rise only where they're needed, as in the dramatic push of "Through the Unseen Barrier." Shift... is heavy with well-realized aural scenery and emotive tones that fully suit Numina's intent. The slightly serrated drift of "Arrival to Nowhere" points up the disk's embrace of dark awe, and "Light Travelling" celebrates the upward release from being with some intriguing sonic turbulence. Who knew crossing over felt this good? There's a distinct sense of the sacred here in hushed hymnal tones and choral whispers. There is the pull of coerced introspection, and a pure, overarching beauty. There's not a moment on this disk that isn't eminently listenable, down to the final quiet exhalations of the gorgeous closer, "The Hostless

Ghost.” And that’s why Shift to the Ghost is another Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD from Numina.

Available from Hypnos Records or via the Numina web site.

vidnaObmana, An Opera for Four Fusion Works, Act Four

I'm going to have to admit that I just don't get it. I've tried to get it, and I don't. I respect vidnaObmana, and I've liked his collaborations with Steve Roach, but... I have to admit that what's going on in An Opera for Four Fusion Works, Act Four or what I'm supposed to understand is going on completely escapes me. I find it a difficult listen--requiring more effort, I'm hesitant to say as a reviewer, than I'm willing to give a piece of music. Perhaps I'm missing the point due to never hearing the first three Acts and therefore don't "get it." But I've never had an interest in music that reaches that point where listening becomes physically rather than intellectually challenging.

I can only say: it isn't for me, If your tastes run to the more avant-garde and experimental, give it a play.

Available from Hypnos Records.

Zero Ohms, Sweven and Unafraid of the Impending Silence

There is a potent dichotomy at work in the music of Zero Ohms (secret identity: Richard J. Roberts). On one side there is the brain-massaging softness of Ohm's signature wind-synth drones. Undeniably relaxing, they form the basis for all his music, the undulant canvas on which Ohms overlays traditional flutes from around the world, processed sounds, and samples. And that's where the other side comes in. While your mind tries to relax, Ohms challenges it with textures and sound-images that range from conversational voices existing just below the drone-surface to clashing metallic sounds that rise up only to resonate back down into a pleasing harmonic addition. This is headphone music. It is pay-attention-and-you-will-be-rewarded music, with some layers so dense that subtler touches come to you from what seems like a great distance. It is music that asks to be understood.

The dichotomy is best exemplified, I think, by two contrasting albums: Sweven and Unafraid of the Impending Silence.

Unafraid is the gentler of the two. Upon first listening to this, I was immediately taken back to a whitewater rafting trip in Maine. After we'd cleared the rapids and emerged into calm water, we were allowed to get out of the rafts and swim. I eased myself into the river and let the current take me. There was nothing but the touch of the water and the wind, a soft sense of motion, and each time I opened my eyes, there was only blue sky and treetops lazing past me.

This is the sensation Unafraid gives. The wind-synth drone is the warm amniotic current that bears you along. Soft burbling sounds, some bordering on mechanical, some like the echo of a temple bell, all reminiscent of water, ease past. Hints of sound peer out of the flow...the aforementioned voices, half-heard through the veil of the last few moments of sleep; here and there, the calls of birds and a far-off flute melody. There is nothing along the way to jar the listener. There are no rough edges. There is no need to leave the river until the end.

By contrast, Sweven is darker and more complex, in places pushing at the borders of musicality. Ohms

plays with the listener, offering relaxing weaves of sound one moment and edged, intrusive composition the next. Pieces such as "Eternal Nows," where clattering synth riffs coexist with church-reverent voices and electronic detritus under a bass-rumble drone and "Sonic Wind" with its harsh, dissonant flute runs give way to the gossamer beauty of "Nikwasi and the Immortal" and "Poetics of Space"--but even here, sonic suggestions lurk in the far backgrounds, continuing to challenge the listener. Sweven is a trial by musical fire with a goblet of heavenly nectar waiting at the end.

Find more on Zero Ohms at Space for Music.

Orbital Decay, Solar Maxima

On their latest release, the duo of guitarist Scott Watkins and keyboardist Terry Furber continue Orbital Decay's legacy of turning out textbook Berlin School explorations. The elements are all here in full force—tightly constructed sequencer work; fluid, spacey synth pads; textured, manipulated guitars. Despite the inherent basal sameness of Berlin-style work, Orbital Decay do a superb job of adding atmosphere and aural imagery to each piece. The title track lumbers in heavy and dramatic, powered by a hammering bass sound like vibrating iron. Watkins' guitar echoes and sings across the top. Energetic spacers like "Terminal Velocity" and "Ten Minutes to Go" brim with sci-fi soundtrack goodness melded with a straight-on rock sensibility. "Running Through the Fog" captures its titular feel with urgent sequencer runs bolting along through walls of vaporous, miasmatic synth chords. And the closing track, "Breath of the Earth," is a deep expedition into the depths of the style, a glorious ride over seventeen minutes in length. In fact, the majority of the six tracks here are long-form journeys, ten minutes long at their lightest, that give the Decay duo ample time and space to stretch, create and more firmly realize each piece's individual vision for the listener. Each is a brilliant homage to the style's foundation while remaining new and invigorating.

I would love to tell you how to get ahold of a copy of this superb disk, but it was given to me by Terry Furber at The Gatherings, and after a bit of searching on the Web, I can't figure out how the general public gets ahold of them. I'll try an e-mail and update this accordingly!

Christopher Orczy, Transition

As I was listening to Christopher Orczy's release, *Transition*, I said to my wife, "I like this. It's not trying to do a lot, and it's doing it quite well." That, I think, neatly sums up the experience of listening to Orczy's smooth, warm CD. Created using a heavily processed French stand-up harmonium from 1904, each of the four pieces here, clocking in at roughly 19 minutes apiece, moves along unhurriedly with breathy chords calmly and patiently floating one over the other in turn. The layers are never particularly deep or complex, but they're beautifully sculpted and calming and each nudges along the next in an flowing tonal progression reminiscent of Roach's "Quiet Music" series. Nothing here is forced; it seems to all grow organically, each chord existing only because the last one did. There is the sense of the artist waiting for the next moment to come, and then transforming that moment into sound. *Transition* is a superbly non-obtrusive piece of work that dwells perfectly in the background. Its pace, flow and inherent quietude is ideal for breath-focused meditation. Fans of drifting, gentle ambient need to give this a listen.

Available at Christopher Orczy's web site.

Rigel Orionis, Night Heat

The musical landscape of *Night Heat*, as crafted by Jim Brenholts in his Rigel Orionis guise, is barren, sparse and more than a little intimidating. It's open tundra under an uncaring sun, a journey of a thousand tortured yet unavoidable steps. And it's stunning. The piece kicks off with a strong tribal sensibility with "The Damp Dessert," where potently hypnotic drums pulse over quavering, slightly discordant synth textures. This is music to completely lose yourself in if you dare. It's an invitation to journey, but you know the destination will be somewhere dark and utterly foreign. After 20 minutes of floating bliss, Brenholts segues into the insanely and brilliantly sparse "Arctic Sunstroke." Prior to hearing this piece, if you had suggested that I would willingly listen to 22 minutes of nothing but a shaker, random electronic burbles and a quietly keening synthetic wind, I would have patted you on the head and sent you on your way. But having listened to it, including the roughly 10-minute stretch where it's absolutely nothing but the shaker and a very pared-down, constant wind, I find it astonishing—you know, in a very minimalist way. Clockwork urgency hovers in the background of "Drastic Eventuality," a piece rife with subtlety and suggestion. Between this and the closer, "Centrifugal," the disk truly enters ambient territory, where all pretension to musicality is replaced by pure sensation, effect and the sense of things going on at the periphery of understanding. It works better in "Eventuality" than in "Centrifugal," which is 25 minutes of murmuring voices, barely audible drones and dark atmospherics. Length is one of *Night Heat's* greatest assets. These long-form pieces allow the listener to fall fully into and appreciate Brenholts' minimalist complexities. Each piece is hypnotic in its own way, complete journeys in and of themselves, pieced together to create a mind-massaging, coolly immersive experience overall.

Available from Hypnos Records.

OTI, Recollection

From the first moment, when the sounds of a scratchy vinyl record and distant bells form a subtle beat, it's clear the OTI's *Recollection* is a classic-style ambient piece, more feeling than mundane musicality. Purporting to be a retelling in sound of the composer's life, *Recollection* wrings deep emotional content from minimalistic output. Impressions built from a wide variety of sounds drift by on cool drone-waves like REM-sleep glimpses of the world. And it's not always a pleasant world. Children's voices in "Large Open Spaces" become sharp and grating, with a sense of something being wrong as they ride exquisitely over a New Age keyboard melody. It's a perfect juxtaposition. Mocking electronic laughter in "Another kind" is genuinely disturbing. Across its length, *Recollection* moves through spaces both light and dark. The sound selections are intriguing and immersive; the drones that form the musical base are elegantly minimalist and waver between calming and foreboding. This is a CD worth repeated deep listens. OTI has put an amazing amount of detail into it.

Available from Audiobulb Records.

Dino Pacifici, Float Zone

If this CD were an old vinyl album, the two sides would be labeled "Dark" and "Light." Pacifici neatly divides the six major tracks here right in the middle--three to either side. The first half comprises three dark, drone-based and slow-moving excursions. Deep sound layers float murkily one over the other. "When It Came," the second track, is especially effective in immersing the listener in its shadowy, otherworldly atmosphere.

With "Undercurrents," Pacifici lightens the mood slightly and brings rhythmic elements to push back the drone. Toward the end of the final major cut, "Epilogue," the mood begins an easy spiral back

down to subtlety, making for a complete journey. The almost gratuitous, 42-second piano piece, "Outro," actually puts a nice bit of musical punctuation on the collection.

"Float Zone" is definitely worth a listen.

Craig Padilla and Zero Ohms, Path of Least Resistance

In the not-so-distant future, when interstellar travel is common, "Path of Least Resistance" by Craig Padilla and Zero Ohms will undoubtedly be the in-flight music on every expedition. For those of us sadly stuck in the merely jet-powered present, this CD keenly describes in music what such a trip might be like, from exhilaration to anticipation. Moving easily between zero-g spacey drifts and sequencer-tinged ramjet drivers fueled by inspiration from Jarre and Tangerine Dream, "Path" is a journey worth taking often.

It begins with the three-part suite "Leaving This Shadow of Heaven," easing the listener into the journey. For 10 minutes lush pads ripple and flow around Ohms' breathy wind-synth work. Sequencer trills dot the background like the glimmer of distant stars. The whole piece builds toward a sense of anticipation, moves through the rush of a graceful takeoff, and then folds back into a hushed sense of floating in a warm, deep void.

Then it's time to fire the retro rockets. "The Everything That Is No Thing" pays superb tribute to early electronic pioneers. It owes more than a bit to Jarre's "Oxygene" and late-70s Tangerine Dream. ("Sorcerer," anyone?) The synth-twangy bassline and analog-style twiddles bring nostalgic glory to the trip. Truly a highlight of the CD.

As an aside, the titles on this CD are magnificent. Seems a silly thing to point out, but they're simply poetic. And "Hollow Dreams of Worlds Passed" is the best of them. The track itself has a certain poesy as well—a quietly drifting lyricism bolstered by bass drones that swell, rumble and fade. It's the feel of cutting the engines and easing into orbit around some distant, vapor-clouded planet.

From there the drift goes on. "Realizing the Infinite" is a swirl of synth that spreads out to sculpt a vision of unfathomable distances. "Frequencies of Life" is another multi-part suite. It begins with deep bass drones that give way to a burbling, hypnotic electronic agenda as readings are taken and the probes descend. Dark spreads of synth pads convey a feeling of searching for something...anything. And then, out of the robotic twiddle and drone the tone softens and suddenly, the soft chirping of birds. We've found a habitable place. In fact, this segment of the suite is titled "Just Like Home." The journey is coming to a close. Calm warmth infuses the music, and a feeling of hope emerges. This melds into the energetic sequencer work of "The One" with Ohms' flute coming in to sing a vivid description of the new landscape.

The title track, which closes the CD, features Ohms' gorgeous Native American flute over quiet drums and Padilla's easy electronic washes. It's the sense of sitting on a high hill on some far-off world, watching a pair of reddish suns lower into a multicolored sea. It is a deep breath of new air, and a sleep full of lush dreams beneath alien stars.

For the earthbound, "Path of Least Resistance" is a ticket to the journey of a lifetime. This a full, richly realized bit of spacemusic that warrants many, many repeat plays. Kudos to Padilla and Ohms for creating such a magnificent voyage.

Available from Lotuspik Records.

Dave Palermo, Ideation

The new offering from Dave Palermo suffers from a very slight case of an identity crisis. Ideation starts off with two well-built drift-based pieces, "Nebula" and "Deep Space." But then Palermo hits the eject button and we're suddenly jettisoned into that iffy shiny area between New Age and jazz. It's not that the pieces that follow aren't good--"Canyon's Edge" is a decent piano piece and "Midnight Traveler" jaunts along on a solid bass riff--it's just that their abrupt arrival seems incongruous after the first 10 minutes of the disk. And then, just as suddenly, the power to the engines is cut and it's back to the drift with "Approaching Vega" and the relatively atmospheric "The Ruins." Then it's back to the New Age feel with the quiet and pleasant tinkling piano of "Emerald Canyon." Next, Palermo hits the mark spot-on with "Vacant Ships"--a haunting piece that finds its voice in an elegant simplicity. The back-and-forth between the spacemusic-inspired pieces and the more dated-sounding, drum-machine-driven New Age work continues throughout the disk and makes for something of a bumpy ride. I find Palermo's drift work to be more listenable than the more upbeat stuff--to the point where I wonder if Ideation would have been better served had the artist decided to go one way or the other.

Available from this web site.

Paradigm 9, Live at Lost Dog Cafe

The thing to bear in mind with this CD is that it's a sort of ex tempore soundtrack for a video presentation, informed and formed by the images on screen. That being said, there's both a great on-the-fly feel and solid structure here, with electronic knob-twiddling meshing with live flute punctuation. It's a great background listen, a hypnotic wash with rising moments of awareness. The best compliment I can give this CD is that knowing it's a soundtrack, it made me want to see what was happening onscreen.

Pick it up at the Magnanimous Records Web site.

Parallel Worlds, Obsessive Surrealism

A strong sense of narrative drama underlies every track on Parallel Worlds' superb new CD, Obsessive Surrealism. Lushly dark, beat-driven and meticulously constructed, Surrealism makes great use of frontman Bakis Sirros' adoration for and mastery of analogue systems. Classic-feel electronic twiddle and sequencer runs blend smoothly with breathy synth pad textures as Sirros leads the listener through his shadowy musical explorations. "Beneath Fear" opens the disc with a gentle piano riff playing in the middle of an ever-darkening atmosphere. Electro-critters chirp in the undergrowth and a phantom chorus sings like a hymnal. "Different Pathways" drips with something both sinister and urgent, a feel that carries into the potent, if short, "Empty Human Cells." The pace slows for "Increasing Complexity," where glitch-and-blip notes arc and bounce over a simple melody. Two short pieces follow ("Interlude" being the better of the two), providing something of a aural palate cleanser before Sirros hits his stride with the 10-minute "Reflective," where a sequenced bass line stalks like a masked killer on a rain-slicked street. Sirros cites the soundtracks of John Carpenter movies as an influence, and the cinematic tint to Surrealism is obvious—as I have said too many times before, these pieces are bits of background music in search of their scenes. And it's never more obvious than in "Reflective." "Mindmists" grabs hold of the listener with heavy-handed piano chords over weeping strings before spreading out to a lighter, more melodic feel. "Pale Yellow Sky" offers more glitch-beat goodness

(again tinged with the ominous). "Distracted" is an oddly danceable bit of funk, with its twangy analogue bassline and body-moving backbeat. The disc ends with "Crying Spells," a piece accented with slightly too bombastic percussion. Other reviewers have noted appreciatively that Sirros keeps his tracks fairly short. I concur. It allows each piece to be a scene unto itself, an enjoyable-if-melancholy story told wholly and never overdone. Overall, Obsessive Surrealism is an enjoyable blend of old and new, melody and melancholy, and dark and light and it's worth many a listen.

Available at the Parallel Worlds web site or from the DiN label

Dave Preston, Be

From the first guttural threat that coils up out of Dave Preston's guitar on "Be Creative," the opening track of his debut CD, Be, you know you're in for a good ride. An undeniable beat on well-slammed drums rises up alongside the layered chords, the track takes wing and Preston's got you hooked. Be is an excellent rookie effort from an engaging guitarist who knows how to pull his instrument back toward an ambient drift and then jam it forward to a rock-driven wail, and he balances both nicely. "Be Creative" leads into the hushed air of "Be Ing," where voices meld with an electronic warble that comes and goes, bordering—particularly later in the track—on being detracting. (There are spots on the disk where it feels like Preston's trying to wedge a bit of twiddle in the wrong spot just for the sake of being more electronic than guitar-ic, but it never entirely pushes past the line.) "Be Joy" opens with a splay of harsh and somewhat misplaced chords before settling into an almost pastoral vibe. (These ears hear a mandolin—they could easily be mistaken.) It's a gentle, rhythmic passage, the essence of "nice." "Be True" enters on slow-handed glissandos as something a little more rough tries to bubble up beneath. This is a track I admit I don't entirely get. The interference that Preston throws in mars rather than enhances the track. It's like a slash wound across something that could have been augmented more subtly, as he did in "Be Ing." I am thoroughly addicted to the next track, "Be Alive," which builds up, layer by easy, intriguing layer, to a sort of early-Oldfield-like density of sound. (Yes, I reference Oldfield entirely too much, but I'm a fan and that's what I hear...) A lonely guitar, a distant voice, high plucked notes, a beat that echoes the one on "Be Creative"...it's interesting to aurally watch Preston pick and place his elements. Midstream he pares the track back to the beat and the voice, prepares the listener up with a bit of electronic accent and, in an absolutely gorgeous moment, drops everything, every full layer he's built, perfectly constructed, perfectly complemented and in full force, back into the mix and it consistently sends a shiver up my spine. This is the highlight of the disk and it should be getting (and is!) play on ambient/electronic radio shows everywhere. "Be Different" is a soft and simple bit of folksy guitar work that's a pleasant distraction from the more electronic intentions on the disk. The mind's eye can easily picture Dave out on the porch on a starry night, just playing quietly to the universe. "Be Something" rides on a hypnotic tide of sine wave chords nudging their way to shore over something of a white-noise rumble. A simple but effective track that pulls you in for a deeper listen. The disk closes with "Be Hope," a dramatic, soaring track where Preston's elegant playing backs wordless, prayer-like vocals. Preston is already getting a fair amount of notice in the genre community for Be, and it's well deserved. It's a thoughtful, well-constructed work that effectively straddles styles without seeming forced. It's a disk I go back to often, and I eagerly await more work from Dave Preston. Be made me a fan.

Available from CDBaby.

Daniel Patrick Quinn, Jura

Listening to Jura is very much like getting a brain massage from velvet-coated and slightly chilly

fingers--it is at once relaxing and scintillating. Built atop a ululating drone that seems to know exactly what your backbrain needs to hear to make it completely relax, Jura is an exercise in minimalism punctuated with moments of straightforward melody. The drone wavers and floats, virtually unchanging, broken only by a short handful of touches on the piano that rear up and repeat intermittently.

Radium 88, Only Science Can Tell Us the Truth

The formula at work on Radium 88's Only Science Can Tell Us the Truth isn't all that new—juxtapose high-BPM backbeats, electronic percussion and twiddly sequencer runs over slower, classical-tinted melodies—but it's done here with such ease, beauty and attention to craft that the Enigma-school concept can be overlooked. "Let There Be Light" sets the overall tone with a slow synth intro that builds before the first gentle piano notes drop into the mix. The sequencer picks up the contrasting pace, string-toned synths drift in, and the formula clicks into place. Several tracks featuring gorgeous vocals from Jema Davies. Her voice floats easily across the underlying melodies, enhancing the slow-over-fast motif. "Two Four Sorrow" makes superb use of this dichotomy, with mournful vocals rolling like a wave superimposed on a boppy, new-wave-inspired backdrop thick with electronic percussion—I'd call it the highlight of the disk. The sad-ballad piano of "Your Message Has Been Erased" would stand nicely on its own, but thrives when placed against a backdrop of choral synth chords and an easy backbeat. I quite enjoy Only Science..., but I do find that trying to listen to the CD straight through becomes something of an exercise in sameness. There's not a lot of variety track to track and the sense of "didn't I just hear this?" crops up frequently. But thrown it into a mix or put it in shuffle mode and each time a piece from this disk comes up, it's immediately engaging, fresh and effective. Only Science Can Tell Us the Truth is a disk well worth owning.

Available from CD Baby via the Radium 88 Web site.

Colin Rayment, Continental Divide

Inspired by a trip to the Canadian Rockies, Colin Rayment has produced a splendid blend of drifting soundscapes and uptempo electronic excursions in his latest work, Continental Divide. The first two cuts, "Glade" and "Continental Divide," showcase what the listener is in for. The former is a short, sighing introduction that gives way to the bolder orchestral feel of the title track, nine and a half minutes of exultation. From there Rayment delves into a quieter place tinged with the essence of science fiction, emerging full-force on "Num-Ti-Jah" and again on "Marble Canyon." While the spacier pieces, such as "Repose" and "Damlan," are very well done, Rayment truly hits his stride when he goes for a fuller sound and drives up the beats.

Rayment credits his friend Ash Stark for his bass guitar work on the album, and I concur. Stark adds an architect's hand, creating a steady rhythmic foundation for Rayment's keyboard explorations. Stark takes a front seat on the reflective "Repose," lending a solid subtlety to the piece's gentle beauty.

Find this CD online at Colin Rayment's Web site.

Resonant Drift, Flow Mingled Down

In his press materials for Flow Mingled Down, Resonant Drift (secret identity: Bill Olien) cites such influences as Steve Roach, Tangerine Dream, and John Serrie--and then, on the album, proceeds to pay superb homage to them. This far-ranging disk opens with the TD-inspired "Until," which bounces in on

a twangy sequencer line and adds ever-thickening layers of e-music memes for a welcoming familiarity. Olien then wanders into deeper, more ethereal zones that blend classic spacemusic airiness with the darker touches of Roachian soundworlds such as SpiritDome with the title track, followed by "Is This the Dream?" and "Indescribable." He touches the depths of darkdrift with "Within, Still," which carries burbling echoes of Brannan Lane's more shadowy creations. From there, it's back toward the light with the easy, floating pads of "Moment" and the energizing old-school funk of "Spiral Nowhere," where Olien once again invokes the spirit of TD before throttling back down through the gentle track "Moment Again," and into the grim-toned, beat-driven and compelling electronica of "Yearning." Olien brings the disk to a close with "Ground of All"--probably the darkest of any track here, heightened in spots by an oddly effective sound like a powersaw ripping through a 2x4--and the contrasting "Sorrow and Love," which rides in on soft, breathy synth pads and concludes with a trickle of water for added calm.

An excellent offering from Resonant Drift, and well worth looking into.

Available at the Resonant Drift Web site.

Markus Reuter, Trepanation

There is a distinctly cinematic quality to the pieces that make up Markus Reuter's excellent work, Trepanation. Each track has a character all its own and creates a strong, layered mental image through sound—fully realized scenes in search of their visuals yet existing perfectly without them. Reuter glides along his music's narrative path from dark to light, beginning with the hammer-fall piano of "The Key to Conscience" and culminating in the meditative grace of "Number of the Mind." Along the way, Reuter easily blends deft musicianship and a range of instrumentation with environmental and displaced sounds—children's laughter, distant conversations, or the darkly authoritarian voice giving wordless commands in the slightly disturbing "Preparation." His layers are thick and elegantly constructed; in any given moment there are a good number of things going on sonically, all demanding attention and all quite worthy of it. Reuter's at his best here in "3 to 4 Days Before the Echo," an immersive, stunning 15-minute piece that pairs deep-space swirls with savage, sudden punches of percussion to superb dramatic effect; "Beat," which slips in with calming, muted vibraphone-style tones and an easy rhythm; and the aforementioned "Number of the Mind," a spiritual and mental balm that moves along slowly to bring this superb listening experience to a refreshing close

Available from Lotuspik Records.

Rhizomorph, Xenofilika

Throw Shadowfax and Planet Drum into the same room, close the door and let them jam. The result will undoubtedly sound a lot like Rhizomorph's funk-driven, world-music-inspired Xenofilika. Rhizomorph mixes his influences and intentions nicely across the disk's ten tracks. After two pulse-raising uptempo tunes ("Bang! Takatifu" and "Latent Ferality") that smack deliciously of Africa and the Middle East, he slows the pace with the contemplative "13th Bliss," thick with guitar glissandos and breath-calming groove. That gets kicked out of the way for the frenetic rush of "Dawamesc," which rockets the listener back to that Middle Eastern sense as a tabla beat rages on against waves of electronica. Then "Khasafa" lumbers in on drums that have clearly helped themselves to a tab of acid and chills the room right back out. This track is psychedelic, trippy and trancey—a feel that carries into electro-tribal pulse of "Cave Prayer." Having offered a pleasant brain massage, Rhizomorph next drops the listener back into a quieter realm beginning with the melancholy "Regret du Jour" and melting into

“Sakra” where environmental elements accent slow chords and electronic exhalations that feel like a look inside someone else’s sadness. The mood brightens, appropriately, with the loungey ease of “Skyward.” (A slight change of feel late in the piece threatens to mar it but Rhizomorph brings it back where it belongs for the last minute.) The circle closes on the last track, “Theta Phase,” as the drums roll back in and we’re back in Shadowfax territory with a solid, dominant bassline and a rich world-music feel. Xenofilika is a superb debut CD from an artist worth watching. Expect more and better from Rhizomorph—but in the meantime, get this disk.

Available at the Rhizomorph Web site and through CD Baby.

Steve Roach, Space and Time

If you're a fan of Steve Roach, listening to the sampler "Space and Time: An Introduction to the Soundworlds of Steve Roach," is like getting together with friends you haven't seen in a while. It's good to see them, good memories come flooding back, and some of them look better than you remember. And if you don't happen to own everything this prolific artist has put out, those friends bring some of their friends; good-looking acquaintances who you immediately get along with and want to find out more about.

Pulling pieces from 13 different albums and seamlessly melding them into a 74-minute whole, "Space and Time" makes either a perfect introduction, as the subtitle suggests, or a delicious retrospective for seasoned listeners. Drawing a continuous line through rhythmic tribal works such as "Early Dawn" from "Early Man" and "The Calling" from "Trance Spirits" to soft atmospheric swells such as "Almost Touching" from "Streams & Currents" and the closing track "Nameless" from 2003's "Mystic Chords and Sacred Spaces," the CD is less of a listen than a journey—and one that bears going on again and again. Given the range of styles and impressions presented, this disk will surely hook the curious newcomer.

For the seasoned Roachian traveler, however, the brevity of the individual pieces can be a touch maddening. Outside of the 12-minute slice from "Structures from Silence" and the 7-minute peek at the upcoming "Fever Dream" (more on that in a moment), four and a half minutes is the most we get of any single track. That's tough to take if, like me, you've got a personal favorite listed here—"A Circular Ceremony" from "Dreamtime Return"—and just as you're sliding into it, it fades out. But the blending is so smooth, and each piece moves so gently and organically one to the next, the irritation quickly fades and we're back on the journey.

The real draw for the veteran is "Fever Glimpse," the sneak preview of "Fever Dream." By itself well worth the \$5 sticker price on this CD, "Glimpse" pulls the drum-based intensity of "Trance Spirits" into the dark swirls of "InnerZone," intermittently laced with an insistent bass riff (on guitar at some points?). Call it deep funk, tribal groove...whatever you call it, it does exactly what Roach intends—whets the slaving appetite for this next full-length release.

Whether you buy this for yourself to add an interesting blended work to your collection, or for a friend who hasn't quite figured out what the big deal about Steve Roach is, "Space and Time" is an offer you shouldn't pass up.

Steve Roach, Fever Dreams Part One

You certainly can't blame Steve Roach for wanting to get his funk on, even if it's just a little funk. After

a series of successful CDs exploring rhythmless soundworlds, Roach returns to the beat with *Fever Dreams Part One*, where familiar elements of his recent recordings hook back up with the subtle tribal percussion elements from earlier pieces such as *Dreamtime Return*, *Early Man*, and *Truth and Beauty*.

Roach has always worked pure magic with the tribal sensibility, and *Fever Dreams* is no exception. Here, soundworlds play a grounding role for the bass and drum loops that take center stage. Each long track--the shortest of the four running 10 and a half minutes--mixes laid-back grooves with a certain sinister air--that serpentine, entrance-to-the-lower-world feel that while at times dark is nonetheless forcibly soothing. Bass guitar from Patrick O'Hearn and Will Merkle nicely anchor the first two tracks and lend that tinge of funk that separates the CD from the latest stuff. Shamanic percussionist Byron Metcalf adds frame drum on the last two tracks, including the nicely understated "Tantra Mantra," which is bound to dredge some primitive memory up out of your subconscious.

Kudos also to photographer Michel Noel for the wonderful wraparound cover art that truly sets the feel for the disjointed journey that lies within.

While at times *Fever Dreams* feels like something you've heard before, some previously visited soundworld but with drums, it is nevertheless another rich addition to Roach's body of work--a piece that looks both forward and back at the same time. Watch for two more parts of *Fever Dream* across 2004.

Check it out at [Projekt Records](#) or the [Steve Roach Web site](#)

Steve Roach, *Fever Dreams II*

With this second offering in the *Fever Dreams* trilogy, Roach goes deep into the collective primitive psyche--perhaps as deep as he's ever gone--conjuring a thick, lush, intricate weave of tribal, holotropic grooves wrapped around Byron Metcalf's relentlessly perfect shamanic percussion and spiked with hauntingly keening vocals from Jennifer Grais. As this 72-minute story unfolds, *Fever Dreams II* guides the listener through some of the most vivid, affecting soundworlds Roach has ever created.

The journey starts suddenly, with the abrupt, growling opening chord of "The Wounded Healer" greeting the listener with a dissonant, disjointed feel. There is the sense of something being not quite right, of being fragmented. "Healer" eventually winds into a smoother feel before giving way to the slow, shuffling dance of "Energy Well." This percussion-driven piece moves from a tribal-drumming feel to a more frenetic, sequenced mode, building and enervating. It is unstoppably empowering. And then, as it reaches a truly high point, it bursts, releasing the listener, and ushering in what is a genuinely amazing piece of music.

"Opening the Space" simply astounds from the start--more so knowing that the only instruments on the track are a well-processed six-foot agave didgeridoo and Grais' emotive, wordless chanting. Plaintive and prayerful, it draws the listener deeper into the experience. The didgeridoo gives way to Metcalf's shamanic frame drum as it takes center on "Heart's Core." Grais keeps the prayer-feel flowing on top of Roach's dark sound-sworls as this one wends its way deeper into the soul. It has a very distinct potency. It is, in a word, transportive.

Fever Dreams II jumps back and forth between powerfully beat-driven soundworlds and more flow-oriented grooves. "Fires Burning" might have been designed to let your heart rate slow back down. The drums slow as dark, lush tendrils of sound--Roach's "nomadic grooves"--rise softly upward.

"Metamorphosis" gently builds , a careful mix of intense drumming and guitar atmospheres. It straddles both of the musical worlds here with a decidedly positive air about it. The Healer's story--and recovery--culminates in "Holding the Space," 20 minutes of glorious Roach/Metcalf shamanic alchemy. Beautifully, the whole thing ends on a fading, rising note. The journey and the healing are complete, and the listener is ready to hit "play" again immediately.

Make no mistake: This is a landmark recording, the tribal-ambient work by which all others will be judged going forward. This is Steve Roach at his absolute best, putting forward a genuinely brilliant, emotive, and moving piece of work.

This most decidedly a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available at steveroach.com

Steve Roach, Fever Dreams III

In this last installment of the Fever Dreams trilogy, Steve Roach smoothly blends tribal intentions with electro-funk grooves to create a journeying soundtrack for the 21st-century wired shaman.

The ride opens with the pulse and flow of "Electro-Erotic," familiar Fever Dreams territory, with quavering guitar sighs, slow-beat drums and subtle hints of the more bare-bones, pure electronic augmentation to come. It ferries us into "Meta-Sense," one of the best individual pieces to come out of the Timeroom in a while. It is an 18-minute trip—with all that word entails— through a bouncing analog rhythm spiced with long, sustained synth pads and tidbits of electronic percussion. A psychotropic, hallucinogenic, hypnotic journey at speed to the lower world and back. "Meta-Sense" gives way to "Polyopsia," which echoes the percussive urgency of "Energy Well" from FDII and directs the disk to a shadowy place. That feel carries through the slow drift of "Pulse Current" and lightens up across the breadth of its faster-paced follow-up, "Pulse Impulse." After the surging urgency of "Borderlands," "Moonshroud" rolls in, picking up the bass feel from the early tracks of FDI, a callback that rises like primitive memory. (Admittedly, it's probably easier to note if you listen to all the FD disks in succession, as I recently did.) That same bass line can be sensed, albeit manipulated, twisted, and drenched in atmospheric electronic murk, in the closing track, "Phantom Fever Rising." Halfway through, this piece strikes for the surface, beginning to shimmer and drawing quiet breath and bringing the first disk to a meditative end.

The second disk--the end of the journey, if you will--is an hour-plus glide through shamanic soundscapes courtesy of Byron Metcalf's drumming and burbling aural imagery from Roach. I'm tempted to say it's Metcalf's show as the drums take the forefront and hold their place, but under the beats Roach is again blending touches and feels not just from the Fever Dream disks before, but from his entire arsenal of sounds, breeding an odd sense of familiarity while at the same time taking the listener to entirely new realms. The point, really, is to simply surrender to "Melted Mantra" and let it guide you where it will. Enjoy the ride.

This double-CD set is a perfect close to the series, and it will garner a lot of repeat play.

Available at the Steve Roach web site

Steve Roach, immersion:two

I will confess to have something of a predilection for the immersion series. immersion : one looped for nine straight hours during my daughter's birth and was the perfect accompaniment to the event, bringing palpable quiet and ease in the wake of labor pains and providing a soft, breathy aural cushion for the little girl's arrival. And so I expected quite a bit from its followup. No need to worry. immersion : two takes the deep-drift mantle laid down by its predecessor and moves the form and the series forward. The sole long-form piece, the aptly titled "artifact ghost," moves through its 73 minutes like a half-glimpsed parade of wandering spirits or the etherea of fading dreams that float around us in half-waking moments. The music affects the space around the listener sonically and temporally; time slows almost to the point of stopping and moments are lost, given over to the flow and the warmth of Roach's textures. The air shifts and calms in its wake, and perception changes. An awareness of spirit rises as the listener is lulled ever downward into the self in a sort of coaxed meditation. Given the continuous play called for on the CD's inside cover, immersion : two stands a fair chance of inducing an out-of-body experience as the listener gives in to the urge to follow Roach's sonic ghosts as they glide and dance.

Both editions* of the immersion series are Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD's.

Visit Steve Roach's web site or the Projekt web site.

*I bought immersion : one when I wasn't actively reviewing, and so haven't covered it here. I don't like to "backtrack" here. But needless to say, it's worth picking up.

Steve Roach, Byron Metcalf & Mark Seelig, Mantram

Cut from the same sessions that produced Fever Dreams II, this disc could be considered FD's mellower cousin. "Mantram" is a cool, calm, beat-enhanced exploration into creating a sort of sonic mandala--a sacred image--through music. It is a perfect CD for meditation. Steve Roach lays down the soundworld skeleton; Byron Metcalf pumps life into it with shamanic drumming; and Mark Seelig makes it breathe and dance with a beautiful selection of flutes. The eight pieces here, identified solely by number, are characterized by a gentle build and a perfectly unhurried feel. The standout track here is "Seven," where Metcalf's frame drum takes command of both the music and the listener. Give in to it. Each strike on the drumhead reverberates to the soul. You will emerge breathless from this track. Do yourself a favor: Press "repeat" when you load this CD and just let it run. It melds beautifully into continuous play and brings a palpable serenity to the environment. This is bound to become a favorite.

Available from Projekt Records.

Steve Roach and Vidna Obmana, Spirit Dome

If you put two half-mad alchemists in one room with all their gear and leave them alone for an hour, something's bound to happen. If those alchemists happen to be sonic masters Steve Roach and Vidna Obmana, the result is Spirit Dome, a live, improvised 73-minute excursion into dark organic spaces and breathtaking musical complexity.

Recorded straight to master at 1 am as the pair were preparing for a concert appearance, Spirit Dome wends its way downward through the listener's consciousness into the primordial, serpentine landscape Roach and Obmana have explored in past collaborations such as Well of Souls and InnerZone. Together they sculpt a dimly lit pathway to the lower world—a journey rich in layered sounds and aural imagery. There is depth here, and distance; there is grace and disturbance; there is peace and

profound unease; all existing perfectly in the same space.

It's important to keep in mind that this is a live recording, with no dubbing or enhancing done in post production. This is Roach and Obmana setting off on their own, pure, riffing off each other, pulling skeins of sound together on the fly and weaving them into a lushly dark tapestry. It is a testament to the near-ideal chemistry the two musicians have developed over the course of their partnership. The piece develops naturally under their skilled hands, growing and recombining easily as it moves onward, elements dropping in and quickly finding their place in the grand scheme. Drums work their way into the flow, bringing a sense of tribe, and playful electronic twitches dot the rolling landscape like a challenge.

What would have made this perfect is if someone had thought to roll video.

Janet Robbins, Carrying the Bag of Hearts

In the liner notes of this short, three-piece CD, composer Janet Robbins mentions that she plans to send out such disks "every few months." While it makes for an interesting marketing plan, the work would have to be much more compelling to get me interested in following along on the journey. Carrying the Bag of Hearts is a good effort, but nothing here stands out enough to make me want to hear more. She has a good handle on a solid spacemusic style, and perhaps 30 minutes is not enough time, but after an initial listen, I had to be reminded that this one was still on the pile to be reviewed.

Check it out for yourself at www.janetrobbins.net.

Tom Rossi, Salma Har

I first got this CD along with a couple other Ajna Music releases, and I listened to the others before getting to Salma Har. To be honest, I think it biased my initial opinion because after experiencing Donna De Lory and Sada Sat Kaur, Rossi seemed to come off like the forgotten cousin of the family. Months later (and I apologize to Tom and the whole Ajna team for the delay), Salma Har turns out to be a very lovely piece of music, if not the strongest this label has turned out. Problem was, my focus had been very much on the vocal aspects of the disk, and truly, that's the least of what's going on here. Rossi has a smooth voice--almost too smooth, because it tends to disappear a bit under the excellent instrumentation. Like other Ajna releases, this is spiritual music, based in everything from Sanskrit to yogic chanting, then flavored with spices from around the globe. More than anything else, it's those spices that make this disk stand out. In particular, "Cherisa" is a jubilation, built on kalimba, drums, and winds, that injects itself deep into your soul and forces it to rejoice. "Resolutions," which follows, brings the spirit slowly back to ground. These two cuts are the highlights on Salma Har.

Find it online at Ajna Music.

Sada Sat Kaur, Angels' Waltz

Traditional Sikh chants get a few interesting twists on Sada Sat Kaur's first album. The beauty and strength of devotion of Kaur's 30-year career as a kirtan singer are on display here, but--what's this? Pedal steel guitar? Indeed. Across the breadth of this CD Kaur plays with the style, bringing outside influences to this ancient music and making it work in pure harmony. The CD opens traditionally with the lovely title track, and then, bit by bit Kaur slides in the new elements. The second track, "Adi Shakti" is the best here, amazingly uplifting from the first note, with mind-soothing harmonies. And

"Bolo Ram," where that yee-haw country vibe slips in on pedal steel and a bluegrass singalong feel, will set even the darkest heart to dancing.

This may be Kaur's first excursion into a recording studio, but here's hoping it is the first of many. This CD is a delightful gift to the public, and a wonderfully accessible introduction to this musical style.

Sada Sat Kaur, Shashara

Sada Sat Kaur returns with her second album to continue putting the funk into your yoga routine. Sat Kaur combines traditional Gurmakhi mantras with musical influences from around the globe, from body-swaying club-style beats to quiet, introspective acoustic guitar. Her voice floats like silk on still water, and the cuts move from soothing to invigorating and enlivening without ever feeling disjointed. If you haven't tried this--or any of Ajna's "metrospiritual" offerings yet--come on in...the joy is fine.

Sensitive Chaos, Leak

I like being pleasantly surprised by the music I receive to review. Often that surprise comes because the music belies the presentation. That is to say, the packaging, which is part of the overall experience of any CD, doesn't raise my hopes for what's inside. Without meaning to be insulting, I have to say that this was true of Sensitive Chaos' new CD, Leak. The cover logo, at first glance, looks like it was roughed out on an Etch-A-Sketch—quickly. So when I reluctantly loaded the disk hoping for the best, the effect of the music was, to pun, amplified, and in a very good way. On Leak Jim Combs delivers a package of equal parts funk, world beats and jazz influences wrapped around a solid electronic core. The title track plods in, quaintly uncertain aboard an ungainly rhythm that slowly gains support from a quiet melody rising beneath it. These meld and smooth; shuffling percussion eases in; and then, from a distance comes Brian Good's flowing saxophone line, elevating the piece to a feel reminiscent of Shadowfax. It does take the track six minutes to get to this point, but listening to it is like watching a building go up in time lapse. And once it's there, it's elegant. The ride continues with "Android Cat Dreams of Mice," a nice fusion of jazz and hypnosis that gets a lift from a thick, funk-inspired bass line. Good comes back on "Starry Night," which is as close to a straight-up jazz tune as you get on Leak. It's a sweet listen, gliding along on that sax and a bouncing beat backed with hiccuppy electronic augmentation. A distorted computer voice welcomes listeners to the upbeat, lilting track, "Painting Earthtones in Orbit." The voice returns at the end of "Nightshift at the Baby Mecha Nursery," a fun piece working from a tinkling melody upward into a nicely interwoven construct that subsequently unwinds itself back toward simplicity. (Whereupon we get the voice again, speaking as if to one of the robot babies—a very nice touch.

Each track is fairly long, giving Combs ample time to fully explore his ideas and possibilities. And he spends the time wisely. Leak is a very pleasant surprise and will definitely garner repeat listens.

Available at the Sensitive Chaos web site or via CDBaby.

Silo 10

Here's your pitchline for this CD: Hypnotic minimalism recorded in an empty grain silo.

Warren Rivera and James Sidlo hit the improvisation trail and bring back a series of thickly layered, engaging drone-based tunes that maximize the natural reverb of the empty silo. (No, really!) Clear, repetitive licks off their guitars rise up out of the dense sound-river that forms the base of their

explorations. This is at once a soothing and challenging CD. In rare instances, such as on "memory game," the reverb, in conjunction with percussive elements, wreaks a touch of havoc, seeming to pit competing rhythms against one another.

"therapy refuge" is a great opening track. It pulls the listener under and holds him there. From drifty simplicity to industrial-lesque borderline noise, Silo 10 makes for an interesting ride well worth repeat listens.

Sky Burial, Of the First Light

Lovers of drone-based ambient would do well to take a listen to Sky Burial's *Of the First Light*. Dense layers of processed guitars flirt with the borderline of noise and industrial without ever stepping over the line. *Of the First Light* is labyrinthine, dark and yet at the same time sonically soothing—the feel of the drones grabbing hold of the mind and folding it back, opening it to the music's effect. There is a distinct spatial sensibility across the breadth of this CD, a sharply delineated foreground, background, and distance, with things going on constantly at all levels. *Of the First Light* is a steady recording built on a unique foundation and identity. There's not much differentiation from track to track, but it's all solidly done and it maintains its thick, grim-edged tone the whole way through. A intriguing listen that demands close attention and repeat play.

Available at Sky Burial's web site.

Slow Dancing Society, The Sound of Lights When Dim

Drew Sullivan, the man behind Slow Dancing Society, melds soulful guitar melodies with lush synth textures on the Hidden Shoal Recordings release *The Sound of Lights When Dim*. Sullivan's graceful guitar work is the very solid foundation of this CD as he plays with a slow, sweeping style that perfectly augments the easy swirl of his deep electronic layers. The pairing of analog and digital instrumentation is seamless.

Particularly effective is the combination of the fourth and fifth tracks, "A Song to Help You Remember to Forget" and "The Warm Familiar Smell of September." "Song" opens with a simple, infectious pizzicato rhythm on guitar over a swirling backdrop, both of which are then punctuated with a sad guitar melody that rolls in absolutely dripping with the feel of a recent breakup. "September" plays off a beautiful melody on acoustic guitar—the kind of thing that would be right at home on a Windham Hill release from the '80s—and builds up from there. The two closing tracks, "How Life Was Meant to Be Lived" and "A Lonesome Settlement," get a helping hand from Craig Ferguson's gorgeous pedal steel guitar work. "Life" takes its foundation from reverential church-organ chords, then adds bits of electronic noise and burble as percussion and as a reminder that yes, this is an album of electronic music, no matter how good the guitar is.

I have to add that the last two tracks are so similar in execution that I had to go back and make sure I hadn't accidentally downloaded the same track twice. Now I just think of them as one long track.

I look forward to more music from Slow Dancing Society. This initial release is the promise of good things to come.

Available by download only at Hidden Shoal Recordings.

Slow Dancing Society, The Slow and Steady Winter

In just two albums, Slow Dancing Society (aka Drew Sullivan) has been placed squarely in my sights as an artist to not only watch, but to eagerly await new music from. SDS' debut CD, *The Sound of Lights When Dim*, first introduced me to Sullivan's artful blend of echoing, lonely guitar and crisp, intriguing electronics. On its enjoyable sequel, *The Slow and Steady Winter*, Sullivan revives that feel and expands his work to encompass even more processed, flowing guitar textures. In fact, it's interesting to hear how Sullivan evolves the guitar-ness of his guitar work up from the ambient depths on *Winter*. In the first track, the shimmering and watery "The Early Stages of Decline," the guitar is all effect, a processed, wavering echo of sound drifting hypnotically from ear to ear. It stays low and incognito in the shadowy snarl of "Depths of December," where a bass-drone rumble mingles with garbled phantom voices. With the title track the guitar begins to emerge to pepper the track with a slash and jangle of distorted chords over Sullivan's signature washes. (I must confess here that the phone-ringing sound in the background on this sets my teeth just a little on edge...) The guitar at last becomes a guitar as Sullivan's elegant, slow-handed playing comes to the front in the shuffling melancholy of "The Time We've Spent," with picked notes redolent of Mark Knopfler. On "Romantica" the guitar shares even billing with glitch-based percussion straight from "A Lonesome Sentiment" on *Lights*, familiar SDS territory. It's a nice touch. The garage-blues overtones of "The Rest of Our Lives" makes it a highlight of the disc. Slow, slow chords that wobble with tremolo, a lazy snare echoing into yesterday and a casual bassline wander along like the last-call song at a smoky four a.m. bar. The disc closes and pulls it all together with the lyrical "February Sun," where a very simple melody, one that may have been plucked from an old 50s doo-wop ballad, repeats around and through sudden, dense guitar washes and floating chords, all anchored around a lazy beat. Toward the end Sullivan cuts loose, wailing for all the world to hear with high, crying notes before letting that old-time melody take over and fade to a reflective quietness. While I'm not as totally blown away by *Winter* as I was by *Lights*, it's still an astounding piece of work that again cements Slow Dancing Society's place--in my ears, at least--as an artist whose next disc I'll always be looking forward to hearing. Bravo, Drew.

Available from Hidden Shoal Records.

Sonic Torture Methods, The Victim's Shudder

DM Winn, under the name Sonic Torture Methods, has turned out a decent suite of dark ambient pieces with *The Victim's Shudder*. After an inauspicious start, he hits his stride with the fourth cut, "Lucretia," which is wonderfully gothic and grim and tinged with a moody beauty. Its follow-up, "Eve of Perdition," features nice, inobtrusive vocal samples. The CD ends with "Mourning Glory," which at times approaches a level of bombast but salvages itself at the end by settling into a quieter, more reflective tone that's more appealing in its comparative simplicity.

More information is available from God is Myth records.

SourceCodeX, Codex Hypnos

This CD is a testament to the growing do-it-yourself mindset in ambient music. Self-admittedly more of an enthusiast than an ambient artist, SourceCodeX (secret identity John W. Patterson) went forth with nothing more than a few computer programs and taught himself to make electronic music. And the results, as gathered on this freshman effort, make for a workable piece of dark listening. Patterson carries the listener through tense, beatless soundscapes that are unrelenting in their grimness. The drones are soothing in a disturbing kind of way, and Patterson has layered his sounds very well.

There's a lot going on below the surface. It must be said, however, that while what he has put together is fairly good, nothing on the CD really stands out. But given this platform of confidence to launch from--along with the handy whenever-you-feel-you're-ready availability of making e-music--I rather expect to hear more and better from SourceCodeX.

SourceCodeX, Primordial Lands Arise

The first time I reviewed work by SourceCodeX (aka John W. Patterson), it was his rookie work and I noted that I was interested in hearing what he would do further down the road, and how far from the world of “look, my computer has a synthesizer” mindset he could move. While admittedly still addicted to the soft synth, Patterson’s sophomore work definitely shows improvement. Primordial Lands Arise is a dark CD of grim-edged soundworlds formed of falling tones crafted into landscapes covered in murk and unpleasant emotions. It’s almost strictly atmospheric with no real pretension to being music per se; but Patterson excels at creating mental pictures. In many cases, though, he overdoes. The bullfrog-sounding croaks in "InnerWorldStopTime Remix" rapidly come to grate on the nerves. The over-echoed vocal on "SilbeallahEblis" could have been more subtle. In many spots, though, Patterson gets it right—and it’s when he’s not using a heavy hand. “AlphaOmegaAdInfinitum” coasts quietly along on graceful drifts with just a hint of darkness at the edges; the hypnotic pulse of “DroneMass” feels like an on-off switch for the conscious mind; and the vaguely disturbing but superbly constructed “HellDreamVimana” pulls many of Patterson’s existing elements together for a 10-minute nightmare that’s the highlight of the disk. Patterson also gets points for showmanship. His tunes are listed on the inset as "Visitations herein"; the print on the disk warns that he's not responsible for "blown speakers or shattered objects" and that the disk may generate alpha waves and thus the listener should not "drive on long trips or operate heavy machinery." All in all, Primordial Lands Arise is a very strong effort from an improving sonic craftsman. Worth a listen if you're heavily atmospheric, drone-based ambient.

Available from the SourceCodeX web site.

Tim Story, Buzzle

Tim Story’s newest, astonishing compilation of sonic portraits, Buzzle, is unique, complex, soothing, invigorating, and perfectly constructed. It is a mix of downtempo beats and lounge-inspired etherea fleshed out with intriguing electronic treatments. Story has opened the big bag of sounds and pulled out some new, unusual and perfectly effective elements that give Buzzle its incredible depth and character.

“rota” starts the ride by combining a slick groove and striding bass line with a guitar riff that feels like it was lifted straight from a 60’s spy movie. Beneath it all is a fuzz-tinged foundation of densely layered sound and percussion. Story’s bass playing takes center stage on many of the tracks here, and it’s a joy to listen to.

The CD moves into “prelude to biting,” a slow, meditative conjunction leading to “decelerate or fasten,” which moves back into the lounge feel with a jazzy beat laced around a contemplative melody on cello and piano as smooth as cold silk.

“monkey builderizer,” aside from having a very cool title, is an indescribable melange of processed sounds wrapped around a funky bass walk. a quiet mantra invoking you to “be a monkey builderizer” slides in like hypnotic suggestion.

on “pol teesh” an upbeat, infectious synth melody bops along over electronic bedrock that swells and crackles beneath it. The pace slows with “otherize” and the elegantly moody “dust bale hole,” where Story’s piano work again takes center stage over film-noir drum brushes, fretless bass accents and subtle electronic punctuation. The bass-driven palate cleanser “cafe kaputt” ushers listeners into the melancholy jazz feel of “the woman singing,” a beautiful track that glides on piano and hand percussion. “albacranky” is another brief, elegantly simple bridge, crossing over to the slow groove of “you are patient,” where acoustic guitar eases to the forefront, adding texture and grace.

Story then takes “Something Happened Here” from his collaboration with Hans-Joaquim Roedelius, Lunz, and remixes it by blending in the Buzzle sound palette. Electro-buzzes and hard drums dance around the easy piano melody.

And then there’s my personal favorite: “yeh!” where thick, grim and fuzzy synth chords shift and slide across a nonsensical-sounding song belted out with pure innocence by daughter Anna Story (with an assist from a bit of sound manipulation), each repetition tagged with a hearty “yeh!” and helped along with more of dad’s superb bass work. It’s wildly engaging.

Having dissected Buzzle track by track, let me cap this review by saying that I can’t stop listening to it. Individually, each song is incredible, full of depth and richness. Together, they are a perfectly constructed suite of eminently listenable music and a seamless, engaging journey. Simply the best CD I’ve heard in quite some time.

Buzzle is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available from Nepenthe Music.

Tim Story and Hans-Joachim Roedelius, Inlandish

From the first graceful notes, it is clear that Inlandish is going to be a work of pure, calming beauty. As it moves along, however, what becomes even more clear is that it is an amazing, almost alchemical blend of growing intrigue, perfectly matching Story’s signature electronic twiddle and atmospheric manipulations with Roedelius’ straightforward, melodic piano. The opener, “As It Were,” comes across as a simple duet for piano and cello. At the edges are hints of electronic augmentation but it resides unobtrusively in the background. With the title track, those augmentative elements begin to increase—but slowly and purposefully, wrapping themselves carefully around each new piece. It’s as if Story is saying “Here, let me try...this,” and then having it all work effortlessly. The playfulness, the back-and-forth between artists, continues through each new track. I’m particularly fond of the duo of “Serpentining” and “House of Glances,” where Story makes his sound-sculptures slither, bop, and curl through Roedelius’ work like anxious animals. “Downrivers” features an unusual array of sounds—one bringing to mind a frantically worked pair of scissors—acting as percussion without actually being percussive while a distant voice sings a quiet aria. “Riddled” is the most upbeat track on the disk, intermittently throwing a crisp beat over a tireless piano riff and Story’s urgent cello. It drips with delicious drama. The final track, “Intermittent Haiku,” is contemplative, easing along on a lightly distorted, almost music-box style piano and hushed voices. It ends the disk like a cleansing sigh. Inlandish is quite simply one of the best, most perfectly constructed pieces of work I’ve heard in a while. It demands repeat listens not to discover layers or things missed on earlier passes, but simply for the sheer pleasure of hearing it again. Inlandish is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available from Tim Story's web site.

Systems Theory, Soundtracks for Imaginary Movies

Perhaps it's just because I'm a long-time Mike Oldfield fan, but I can't help but hear bursts of his influence across the course of Systems Theory's very listenable Soundtracks... The strong opening cut, "Green Miata Baja Bound" boasts a guitar riff so Oldfield-ish that I initially wondered if it was sampled. "Four Piece Suit," which winds its way through the noted number of musical personality phases, feels a bit like "Northstar"--and finishes up, in the section called "Solar Flared Trousers," by grabbing the listener's attention and forcibly holding it there. In other places Systems Theory show a style and sound strictly their own, and it's a damn fine style and sound. Soundtracks... moves with no discernible effort from jazzy riffs to easy ambience to flat-out potent rock moments. "Water Through Fingers" and "Zero Sum Equation," with its sudden midstream shift, are also highlights here, and the moody "Last Letters from Stalingrad," with flashes of Tangerine Dream brilliance, is a perfect closer. A delight to listen to, and definitely worth repeat plays.

Visit the Systems Theory Web site.

David Tagg, Extreme Scenic Route

Pleasant in its minimalist simplicity but packed with bits of sonic candy, Extreme Scenic Route is a very good CD for background or deep listening--with one track being a notable exception. Tagg lays down nicely layered, tone-rich drones that shift and waver under a sure hand. His style is hypnotic, unhurried, and organic. Touches of percussion come in without disturbing the surface, without breaking the immersion. This is music that becomes subdermal, as good ambient should, and blends with breathing. Even the comparatively upbeat "Children Throwing Stones," with its palpable beat and tasty sound processing, slips neatly into place. The one misstep here is the jarring 40-second "Interlude," which rips into the flow like a runaway bagpipe with an attitude problem. I'm sure that, thematically, Tagg sees how it fits with the rest of the CD, but from a listening standpoint, it's a poke in an otherwise calm and relaxed eye. But Tagg recovers to finish off the disk with two more well-crafted ambient pieces. All in all, Extreme Scenic Route is a solid effort well worth listening to--just program your CD player to skip track 5.

Find it at the Electronic Diversity Web site.

Tkatka

The debut CD from the duo Tkatka (PJ Norman and Carlsson) rolls in on chunky beats that shoulder their way through an array of electronic goodies and catchy melodies to land firmly in a spot halfway between music for the commercial for the world's coolest sportscar and the soundtrack to a Blade Runner-esque sci-fi movie. It's tweaked EDM riding on lounge-style backbeats and overall it's a pretty fine ride. Push past the clunky opener, "LazerLab" to get to the meatier "E.L.D.A.C." where the feel of a fuzz guitar escorts you through a spy-flick groove. "Scorn Proof Weather" courses through its four minutes with a lightly dramatic feel—perhaps the backdrop to a driving scene in that sci-fi flick—propelled on a catchy sequencer line. The highlight of the disk comes in the airy "(It's Just A) Molecule" with its feel-good bounce and a melody that rolls along like a narrative. "Bedroom Dust" starts slow but soon becomes more welcome as it burrows its way into your need to move. It's another soundtrack-worthy cut. "Sundae Haze" lopes through with blissed-out ease and psychedelic intentions, aided by a nicely warbling guitar in the background. "Globyl," the 10-minute closer, slides in under the mental radar and starts to massage the brain with its odd collection of subtle beats, washes of electro-

noise, chopped and diced editing (which sometimes grates on the nerves just a bit) and distant vocal samples. The best word for it is “interesting.” Weak tracks here are few and thankful a bit far between. There’s a good diversity of sound across this disk and the elements all play together nicely. It’s a very good CD to have as part of a mix as it brings a nice blend of electronic funk and downtempo pleasure.

Available from 100m Records.

Justin Vanderberg, In Waking Moments

As you put Justin Vanderberg's In Waking Moments into your CD player or start it up on your iPod, be sure to set either device for repeat play. Then breathe deeply and prepare to live within the sound. This is a gentle, meditative journey that courses unhurriedly through areas of light and shadow in equal parts. Vanderberg layers long, slow-exhaling chords, each placed in perfect complement to those both before and after, crafting perfect ambient-music constructs. Along the way, soft bells, hints of a drumbeat or a repeated melodic phrase infrequently anchor the dreaming listener to the corporeal world. This is a full-immersion disk that works for both attentive listening and as a soothing backdrop. I literally spent an entire workday with In Waking Moments in my headphones on constant repeat. There was no sense of hearing it again, no urge to stop or to move ahead to something else. The only thought was to just be. To be there within the sound, letting my attentiveness rise and fall as the day dictated, becoming mindful of the music in places, slowly soaking in the superb beauty of Vanderberg's compositions. And that's the earmark of a genuinely good ambient CD—its ability to allow you to exist within it without question or interruption. Warm, engaging, and quite simply genuinely pleasant, In Waking Moments is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available from Hypnos Records.

Stephen Van Handel, Pearls of the Soul

Composer Stephen Van Handel is taking advantage of the do-it-yourself power of electronic music and the Internet to reissue three of his CDs: his 1986 debut, *Les Pieces Pour Le Nouveau Monde*, and the follow-ups *Chiaroscuro* and *Pearls of the Soul*.

Les Pieces and *Chiaroscuro* (1992) are well-crafted pieces that showcase Van Handel’s bridging of classical sensibilities and New Age style. Considering, as the liner notes point out, that they were recorded on tape, “track at a time, sound at a time,” they come off with an astounding professionalism and excellent quality. The music here ranges from delicately contemplative songs to work that borders on bombastic in its intensity—pieces that almost seem to try too hard but can still hold a listener.

In between the two is 1989’s astounding *Pearls of the Soul*. Right from the start this CD is infused with a sense of release, playfulness, and a need to explore. Lighter by far than the other two works, *Pearls* combines Asian and Native American musical styles and blends them neatly with some experimental touches. Consider the tiny bits of electronic percussion that flit from side to side in the opening track, “Asha, Awake,” sounding at first like a glitch but resolving themselves into a vital component of the piece.

In places, *Pearls* carries echoes of Shadowfax, Mike Oldfield, or Ray Lynch, repainted with Van Handel’s personal palette and overlaid with the constant sense that the composer is just having a damn fine time for himself. From the drum-driven world-groove feel of “Winds of Nazca” and the joyful “Ese Pequeno Sentimiento de Felicidad” to the softer, more ambient touches of “Thunder Dance”

(which is too good to be so short!) and “Listening in Ancient Caves,” this CD is a clear labor of love and a pleasure to listen to. The only mis-step here is the anthemic and bold “Le Triumph,” which would have been more at home on either of the other albums. After that somewhat tangential piece Van Handel gets back into the perfect slot he’s created with two more New Age-tinged pieces and then closes the work with the blessedly lovely “Solace,” a gentle piano piece that leaves the listener wanting more--not just of this album, but of Van Handel’s increasing mastery of the genre. A fourth album is promised, and I look forward to its arrival.

Check out Van Handel’s work at www.vanhandel.com.

Various, Sounds of a Universe Overheard

The new Hypnos compilation *Sounds Of a Universe Overheard* is another of those disks that are hard to review cogently because it’s another of those disks where somewhere in the middle you suddenly realize just how far you’ve drifted along the soundcurrent without realizing it. And then, noting same, you try to be more mindful but within a short while you’re floating again, quite pleasantly so, and you wonder how you’re ever going to comment on something you can’t entirely recall, other than to say it was so lulling and lush that you can’t entirely recall listening to it. Hypnos head M. Griffin has done an amazing job not only of culling together from disparate sources a soft and dark blend of slow-moving ambient, but of seamlessly melding them one track to the next. There are no bumps here, no abrupt switches in styles. Griffin opens the disk with the geometric precision of Jonathan Block’s “The Language of Rocks” before giving us over to the flow. The listener is carried through the shadow-cave depths of M. Peck’s “Somna” and “Nitrous” by Freq.Magnet, the latter coming dangerously close to inducing a hypnotic state, and on through the descriptive aural text of Kirk Watson’s “Scarecrow” as it glides from its creepy beginning to a more soothing sense. From there, dreamSTATE launches into the spacey drone textures and sighing distances of “Ghost Nebula,” depositing the listener in the nervy, penumbral landscape of Seren Ffordd’s “Strange Attractor,” perhaps the darkest and sparsest track on the disk. The dark continues through Dwight Ashley’s “Behold the Trampled Wheat,” painted as always in the artist’s beautifully murky palette. This track takes the listener briefly out of the drone zone toward the end with some gracefully orchestrated string sounds. Justin Vanderberg dials it all back down with the smooth, drawn-out washes of “Infection.” Glimmers of light peek through the well-drawn shadows across the span of Igneous Flame’s gracefully soaring “Pandora” and Tau Ceti brings the disk to a gentle close with the soft fluidity of “Float.” Universe is dense, rich, and heavily layered with sonic imagery. I cannot call out a highlight here, despite the inclusion of several artists I rank as my personal favorites, because the disk simply has to be taken as a whole—a whole and wholly engaging voyage through a universe which does, indeed, deserve to be overheard. Often. *Sounds of a Universe Overheard* is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Available from Hypnos

Various, Spiritual Chillout

Intencity Records has put together a very good Enigma-school collection under the utterly marketable title of *Spiritual Chillout*. There’s enough variation in the twelve chant-and-backbeat-style pieces here to make it listenable without succumbing to the trap of sounding like one track playing over and over. The strong opening piece, “Humilitas” by Lesiem, borders on being almost too commercially friendly, but is salvaged by the lovely, soaring vocals of Maggie Reilly, whose work in the 80s with Mike Oldfield I loved. Mysteria’s “In My Soul” follows and lays a blues-gospel vocal sample over a sweet piano melody and truly brings in the chill-out feel. Govinda’s “Love Glitch” and “Sky Chill” from

Mysteria may soothe the spirit but their sensual rhythms, and Dawn Marie Poccia's soft voice on the latter, run a good chance of awakening the libido as well. Makyō's "Chandan" lends a few minutes of trippy bliss through Zen-like simplicity. After Eden's "Metamorphosis" kicks up the beat a touch, the wonderful "River" by Ikarus, one of the CD's strongest tracks, puts the groove in gear with feel-good vocals and a sparsely lovely production that maximizes its danceable beauty. Upanishad contributes the Middle Eastern-tinged "Shaman Winds" to keep the upbeat vibe moving. Magna Canta brings back the Gregorian chants with "Recrodare," and starts the CD's move back toward slower, gentler beats. It's not an outstanding track, but it's purposeful in bringing the album around. Monica Ramos' "Elements" is a workable bit based around a harp melody that's just a step too far over the New Age edge.

Two of the best cuts on this CD are mantra-driven. The Essence's "You Are Part of Everything" features the silky vocals of Charlotte Ellis repeating the title over and over (and reminding us that everything is part of us, too); GAIA's "Go Gently" closes the CD with Katie Marne advising us that "Wherever you go, go gently." Having listened to Spiritual Chillout and fallen into its easy vibe, you will indeed go gently. A great CD for mixes or use as an inobtrusive background--but you'll catch yourself subconsciously rocking.

Available at the Intencity Web site.

Various, French Kiss

I'm beginning to wonder if the mission statement over at Intencity Records includes some mention of trying to get people naked. I've noted before that their Spiritual Chillout compilation and Govinda's Worlds Within both have their eros-stirring moments, and this latest offering is no exception. French Kiss is like the soundtrack to a Sunday morning seduction. Opening with the soulful voice of LornaLee in "Tu Es Le Seul" (which, pardon me for saying so, sounds oddly like the new McDonald's "I'm Lovin' It" jingle), French Kiss slides like warm skin on silk sheets through a dozen Euro-tinged downbeat delicacies. Urban Chill's "Good Morning Milkman," if you'll forgive the pun, delivers a smooth vibe; the unrepentantly sexy Govinda flavors his "C'est Nous" with Middle Eastern-tinged violin; Mysteria's "Moon Rendezvous" is kissed with tender vocals from Dawn Marie Poccia over a bed-rocking beat; Le Mirage slips in with a sultry, eponymous tune carried on a gorgeous bassline; Rohan's "Awake" is one of the highlights here, gentle, deep, and seductive--the way it ought to be. Music, that is. What were you thinking?

French Kiss is another solid collection from Intencity, who are--in my opinion--rapidly becoming one of the best labels for world-tinged chill. Check them out at their Web site.

Verplanken, Autopsy of a Dream

This is half of a good CD, and half of a CD that wants to be experimental and interesting and just falls short--but at the same time, it merits more than a single, cursory listen. The CD starts out well, with "Paradise," which blends a slow melody with intriguing sound play. Verplanken places a layer of disturbance and dissonance over the calm, which really makes it work. "Goodbye Paradise" switches gears--as the CD does often--with prog-rock-influenced guitar driving it forward over a synth backdrop. A vocal-sample chant adds depth. "Sputnik Ghost Dance" is the best piece here. It's a driving, funky synth piece that feels like very early analog stuff. Simple, repetitive, and hypnotizing, it's a very cool, toe-tapping listen. And it's also the end of the easily listenable stuff here. Beginning with "Out of Order," Verplanken decides it's time to go experimental. But it goes too far. For the next five tracks, there's squiddly synth and torturously manic piano, random sounds clumped together for no

apparent reason, and vocal samples that repeat to point of annoyance. A good effort that suffers from going too far afield.

Check it out at www.verplanken.com

Vietgrove, The Little Apocrypha

There's nothing wrong with Vietgrove's CD *The Little Apocrypha*. But at the same time, there's nothing outstandingly right. It's a well-built bit of somewhat formulaic prog rock that rides on some very good guitar, but each time I've listened to it, I've had two thoughts: one, that it will not, in fact, turn into Kansas' more obscure stuff from *Leftoverture*, and two, that I keep waiting for something to pop. There's not enough differentiation between the tracks to avoid the dreaded Didn't I Just Hear This syndrome. "In Nos Aetas Ultima Venit?" shows a moment or two of breaking away and gets points for suddenly developing some funk and a grooving little bass line, but as quickly as it appears, it flees. Good structure, good guitar, and good intentions are here in force. But it's not enough to add up to something that gets more than a short, casual listen after the first go-round. If you're a big prog fan, give it a shot.

Find it online at www.vietgrove.com

Vitaly, Looking at the Stars

Vitaly's *Looking for Stars* is a New Age-style CD, ostensibly driven by a love-story narrative, that at times tends to stray a touch too far into John Tesh/Yanni territory for my tastes. On the other hand there are tracks that stand out from the remainder by virtue of their intriguing electronic treatments and solid uptempo beats. "Mechanical Feelings" pushes aside its sugary predecessor ("Universe") and bounces in on a techno-worthy bass twang over light piano and builds upward in intensity and density from there. "Far Voice" picks up the momentum and runs with it, turning lighter and jauntier along the way. It's an oddly infectious track, although distinctly very pop-New Age. The disk reaches its funkier point with the groove-packed pleasure, "Alien Party." It would be safe to call this one the disk's highlight. "One" is another bit of techno-esque frenzy, catchy enough but lacking the depth to make it truly interesting. The gentle closing track "Night" is very nicely done, an easy mix of quiet piano and subtle electronic complement. Along the way Vitaly includes a couple of "Interlude" pieces that feature electronic voices warbling a bit of nonsense dialogue to push his underlying theme of a "story about two lovers looking for happiness in an ultra-modern world of machinery and electronics." While I get what he's doing in a narrative way, it simply doesn't work, adding nothing to the overall concept.

Available from Vitaly's web site

John Vorus, Transmuting Currents

On his debut CD, *Transmuting Currents*, John Vorus creates a dark, fathomless and purely evocative soundworld that is equal parts mystery and wonder. Unhurried and fluid, *Currents* moves through its nine component pieces on lush, deepwater-drift synth pads augmented with bits of organic sound, always bordering on darkness without crossing fully into it. We are clearly in deep water, perhaps the deepest, in the reaches where the sun cannot penetrate, where our consciousness first began to form, and we are not alone—but we know we're safe here. And so we float in willful surrender, trusting in and given over to the soundcurrent.

The middle section of the CD, the excellent combination of the tracks “Water Cairn 1” and “Swampland Dub,” lifts the listener toward the surface with stronger physical elements—drums and Vorus’ superb didgeridoo work. The arrival of the beat in no way detracts from the slow, relaxing journey. Rather, it enhances, breathes air into and invigorates it. From there, the impression across the next three tracks is of emerging in some vast grotto rife with secrets and ancient, undisturbed life. The current bears us easily along until, in the final track, “Krill,” we submerge again, drifting ever downward and accepting our gentle return to something quietly and comfortably primordial.

It is impossible not to completely immerse yourself in this work. Vorus has seamlessly layered myriad elements here, and *Currents* reveals more of itself and the elegant density of its crafting with each subsequent listen. It is an ideal headphone experience, and superb for meditation or low-volume repeated play.

Kudos also to Vorus and whoever put the disk together for the packaging design on this CD. The CD sleeve slides into an outer cover with the track listing on the back. The all-black material is smooth and embossed, and the cover art on the CD sleeve is stunning.

For lovers of drifting ambient, *Transmuting Currents* is a Hypnagogue Highly Recommended CD.

Visit John Vorus’ Web site. Also available at steveroach.com.