

'I know you now as in memory flown'

Christ in the House of Martha and Mary, Martyn Bates (Hive-Arc)

Half-heard transmissions from the other room... Echoes in a distant subway... Someone talking to themselves under their breath.... The radio flickering through channels... Fucked-up folk and pastoral electronica... Self-destructed songs and kamikaze deconstruction... Instinctive songs and whispered memories... Sound addiction and soundproofed thoughts...

Eyeless in Gaza are on hiatus, Martyn Bates has put on his Kodax Strophes outfit and entered the recording studio. His superpower is sound subversion and timewarp ambience. Here he recalls his family's radio, its slow-warming valves and gentle glow, the distant voices, fragments of tunes and the call-signs of the past.

Here are an eerie version of 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone?', piano etudes, fractured songs and juxtaposed tapes. Here are sonic magic and twisted nostalgia. 'When the world was new – colours were as fortune, set in signs inside of me' sings Bates, but of course it is not the world that has faded, it is Bates' perception: the passing of time and human aging makes things expected, everyday and ordinary. It becomes more difficult to deal with changes and disappearances, forgetting and partial recall.

Instead of the fading found photos that Bates' and Eyeless in Gaza's music often comes wrapped in, this new limited-edition CD features a detail from the Velázquez painting in London's National Gallery that the album shares its title with. The detail Bates has chosen is not of the part of the image which features Martha and Mary, who are in a picture within the painting. What we see are two kitchen workers, one comforting or reassuring the other; we are unable to see the Bible story hanging on the wall.

So, we are seeing a partial reproduction of a 15th Century painting set in Spain, which references through a picture within a picture – yet now excludes – a story from 1st Century Palestine, written down in the 3rd. The original painting is concerned with both a depiction of contemporaneous workers and the argument about whether the spiritual or earthly is more important as evidenced by the sisters Martha and Mary when Jesus visits their house. (One cooks and cleans, the other sits and listens.) But Bates doesn't really want to go there, he is more interested in what he refers to as 'electromagnetic excitement', how to resist the threats and bewilderment of the age we live in, how to select and repurpose from all the possibilities of music and experience around us. How to time travel, make music that opens up more music within itself, that references both remembered and fictional pasts and futures; sound pictures within sound pictures within sound pictures, and so *ad infinitum*. How to embrace the moment, and all possible moments, at once.

Collage, remix and juxtaposition, constructing something new from the old, are well-established processes, as is the use of recording studios as an instrument in themselves. Bates refers to this new album as 'an attempt to fuse/collage together lots of unconscious dream-like/time bound and/or time-transcending musical and lyrical bits & pieces', which gives it a more mystical interpretation. This is felt, responsive, music, gathering up and repurposing whatever can be made use of. This is sparkling, original, subversive, gorgeously addictive music.

There are endless self-referents here and many questions. Is that a sample of an Eyeless in Gaza song? Or something that sounds similar? How do *that* trumpet phrase and *that* harmonium drone fit together so well? How does the bass energise the song so simply, changing its whole direction and emotional context? How does Bates weave his enigmatic lyrics through these sounds so effortlessly and intuitively, turning them into songs? (Bates, of course, has previous: who else would record two acapella albums of James Joyce's poetry, or reinvent historical Murder Ballads as extended dronescape laments for a trilogy of songs?)

The beauty of a sharp-edged knife... A broken-tooth smile... Creased skin and hard-of-hearing... Raindrops on the sunshade over the garden table... The end of transmission, the start of the night... The broken promises of today, the possibilities of tomorrow... The carnival is over, all the flowers have gone... Static, noise and interrupted drama... Worry and unease... Misconstrued intuition, misunderstood emotion... Impossible obstacles and futile gestures...

But, sings Bates, 'it comes to rights somehow – over & over I'm found – ah now, I am found.' Bates' musical ambition and willingness to experiment and create, his restless but constant creativity, has produced a career highlight. Although it has precedents in works such as Eyeless in Gaza's *Pale Hands I Loved So Well* album, a favourite of mine, this CD is even more surprising and original. He really has reached for the stars, even though he knows that although their radio waves and light are only reaching us now, their physical existence is long gone. Starshine and abstract sounds are all that is left of what once blazed and orbited elsewhere in the universe. This is beguiling and addictive, genuinely new and revelatory music.

Rupert Loydell