Less is More

*Ship of Fools (The Island Albums)*, John Cale

John Cale was basically kicked out of the Velvet Underground in 1968 but by the early 1970s found himself recording solo albums for Island Records having already been a producer for albums by Nico and Nick Drake and released a couple of solo albums. This new 3 CD anthology gathers up three albums, *Fear*, *Slow Dazzle* and *Helen of Troy*, with a few stray bonus tracks.

*Fear* is an astonishing album, but like its two accomplice albums, it is awkward sounding and doesn't evidence the strength of its songs. Cale is at his best when solo, accompanying himself on keyboard or guitar, his strong Welsh voice declaiming his lyrics. On the Island albums the songs are subject to the whims of the likes of Eno and Phil Manzanera – both credited as 'Executive Producer' – and regular Island session musicians such as Chris Spedding, along with Phil Collins on *Helen...*, who all detract from the songs' own trajectories.

The slow stuttering fade out of 'Fear is a Man's best Friend' may be genius, but in the main Cale is actually a composer of songs. Of tunes and the words to go with them. Of intriguing lyrics and the music to accompany them. Although 'Experiment Number One' on the later album *Caribbean Sunset* is an astonishing experiment in immediacy and studio improvisation, and the New York No Wave albums *Sabotage/*Live and *John Cale Comes Alive* are raw and exciting, it is studio albums such as the pared back *Music for a New Society* and solo live albums that show Cale at his best.

These are where Cale lets the songs, not clever arrangements or studio trickery, do the talking. The three albums on *Ship of Fools* are fantastic, clever and seductive, but ultimately they are of their time, the smartarse 70s before punk arrived to ask a whole bunch of questions and provoke both a paring back and energetic rethink. Less would become more.

Songs such as 'Cable Hogue', 'I Keep a Close Watch', 'Guts', 'You Know More Than I Know' and his visceral dismemberment of Elvis Presley's 'Heartbreak Hotel'\* would remain in Cale's live set for decades, but here they feel restrained and caged within their arrangements and overproduction. These albums are full of astonishing songs but ones that are waiting to burst out and fly free.

Rupert Loydell

(\*Elvis Presley sang the song but did not write it, although he was given a co-writing credit as part of the deal for recording it.)

EMBED: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73Bn0Kq7rls

John Cale performs 'Heartbreak Hotel', 1983

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