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Aphex Twin's Selected Ambient Works Volume II (33 1/3)



Synopsis

Extravagantly opaque, willfully vaporous • Aphex Twin's Selected Ambient Works Volume II, released by the estimable British label Warp Records in 1994, rejuvenated ambient music for the Internet Age that was just dawning. In the United States, it was his first full length on Sire Records (home to Madonna and Depeche Mode), which helped usher in Richard D. James, for whom Aphex Twin is but one of numerous monikers, as a major force in music, electronic or otherwise. Faithful to Brian Eno's definition of ambient music, Selected Ambient Works Volume II was intentionally functional: it furnished chill out rooms, the sanctuaries amid intense raves. Choreographers and film directors began to employ it to their own ends, and in the intervening decades this background music came to the fore, adapted by classical composers who reverse-engineer its fragile textures for performance on acoustic instruments. Simultaneously, "ambient" has moved from esoteric sound art to central tenet of online culture. This book contends that despite a reputation for being beat-less, the album exudes percussive curiosity, providing a sonic metaphor for our technologically mediated era of countless synchronized nanosecond metronomes.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Marc Weidenbaum had an uphill battle with writing about an almost entirely instrumental record, where only 1 track had an official title, and the artist has been notoriously reticent to interviews recently. Weidenbaum tackles the record from every conceivable direction, finding fertile ground in

the "beatless" tag applied to the record early on, its influence on (and how it was influenced by) ambient music, the myriad ways the record has been dissected, adapted, and performed, and the very concept of untitled music has on both how it's perceived and how modern technology handles the nomenclature of metadata. To his credit, the author bases very little of the book on a phone interview he conducted with Aphex Twin the late '90s. A lazier writer would base the entire book on that conversation, but Weidenbaum is smart enough to know that it's the listener's interpretation of the record, divorced from the artist's intent, is much more interesting to delve into. SAW2 is therefore treated like the text that ideas spring from, not a concrete piece with a singular interpretation. Readers should be aware that Richard D. James figures very little in this book; unlike many 33 1/3 books, SAW2 is not a mini biography. Perhaps that's the way the artist, who's alternately obscured and disseminated his identity and working methods, would like it.

I'm impressed by this book, as it comes close to embody what I want the 33 1/3 series to be like: an insightful, written documentary that shines through as a labour of love without losing its journalistic cool. Weidenbaum nails all this with an album I thought was very unlikely to appear in this series in the first place. I think I laughed when I first saw the announcement for it. Yes, I'm impressed. I hope he writes about an Autechre album next, or Stereolab's Transient Random Noise Bursts With Announcements. Please!!

I was hoping for a bit of inside dirt on Aphex Twin's composition practices or explanations in what went into creating particular songs. While this is more of a discussion of the discourse surrounding the album as well as a snapshot of the industry and scene that provided its context, it's still a fun read. Would recommend to SAW II / Aphex diehards, but not sure if it has broader appeal.

These 33 1/3 books are always a mixed bag since you don't know what angle(s) the author will choose to take. I consider this volume on Aphex Twin's SAWII one of the better ones because of how Weidenbaum positions the album in the context in which it was released. The early- to mid-1990s were a time of strange popularity for all kinds of electronic music (even though electronic music has been composed since the 1960s and continues to be composed now) and SAWII is one of the strangest albums within the period because it bucks so many of the trends of the time: it's not dance music, it doesn't "rock", it's not showy in terms of composition or performing skills, yet it's also unlike the happy/dubby/bubbly ambient music of The Orb, FSOL and other '90s contemporaries. If I am disappointed in one thing about Weidenbaum's book, it is that he spends so much time talking

about what this album is *not*, at the expense of spending more time talking about what it *is*. I would have liked to read more of a track-by-track breakdown/commentary, but as it is, the author only discusses 7 or 8 of the album's 25 pieces at length. (There is also no discussion of how the music was made, but to be fair, I did not expect that since Richard D. James is famously secretive about his methods.) I still enjoyed the book, however, as a snapshot of a period in the history of electronic music, as well as a welcome prompt to revisit a favorite album with fresh ears.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book about one of my favorite albums of all time. There were a lot of stories that I previously knew, but never understood the context behind them (such as the pictures correlateing with the track "names"). Mr. Weidenbaum looks at every minute detail of what makes this album truly magnificent and dissects them in a thoughtful way. Initially I was a little concerned that by reading all of the aspects that lead up to it's creation, it would somehow tarnish the magic of this album, however that is not the case with this book (If anything it augmented it!) I highly recommend to any Aphex Twin fan (any anyone who appreciates music for that matter).

It's not full of revelations on the album from Richard himself, but it's a good easy read about the circumstances surrounding him signing to WEA, why the album is so different from the rest of his catalogue, the impact it's had, etc. The writing can be a little dry sometimes, but still a good analysis overall.

Weidenbaum has taken on a fundamentally impossible project: how the hell do you write a book about an album full of 'songs' that seem more like ambient sound collages, and which often seem to lack any rhythmic motion or idea of structure? This is a 33 1/3 book which is more about the ideas around the music and its reception than about the music itself, and while he does an impressive job offering a variety of perspectives, I think this entry in the series is a bit too dependent on discussing the critical response to the album and the ways its been covered and used by classical arrangers and dance troupes. I wanted to know more about this deeply weird music itself, in so far as you can 'know' anything about music this oblique

More than just a track-by-track descriptive essay, Marc Weidenbaum's recent entry in the 33 1/3 series is collection of thoughtful, interrelated essays that also delve into the behind-the-scene activity relating to the creation of Aphex Twin's classic album (as well as the electronic music scene in general) and shows how this album has influenced other aspects of our culture (film, dance,

classical music, etc.).

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