

"It's easy to transport yourself back to the genesis of electronic music—the avant-garde enclaves of San Francisco and New York and Paris—where tape loops became one more instrument in orchestras that shunned no particular sound. As a stunning technological leap, the tools of synthetic noise belonged primarily to the engineer-composers of the period, the Cages and Stockhausens.

You'd expect that as those tools became increasingly available to the masses, that electronic music as a genre would crossbreed with rock, become less cerebral, trade Zen-like focus for something muscular. Some techno aside, the opposite has happened: Cage's anarchic stages and randomized landscapes are closer to the voluptuous walls of sound a Brooklyn noisenik would find familiar, and solo laptop auteurs like Alka (aka Bryan Michael) have shifted towards a distinctly melancholy palette and monkish process that feed into the most neoclassical temperament imaginable.

Such are the forces at work on *Principles of Suffocation*, a finely tuned pastel symphony that weds dub-lite beats to spacey, chiming ambience. Turn "Un-Vaccina" up all the way, and it's an acidhead's ideal slap-happy club mix; turn it all the way down, and he'll be hypnotized instead by the gently whirring drones that anchor it. Standout "Side Of A Mountain"'s wah-wahed warm synth pads slur over percolating tin-can rat-a-tatting that matches the poker-faced hyperactivity of Aphex Twin's propulsive rhythms. Even as they lull you into a false sense of consistency, the environments are morphing—sometimes to microtonal degrees—around a secret core. It's a neat bit of trickery, and one that betrays Alka's allegiance to the likes of Philip Glass and Terry Riley: change and stasis, speed and slowness, at least to musicians with a certain enviable talent, are not mutually exclusive. Neither are machines and a sense of the pastoral."

-- Miles Klee



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