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Black Strobe

Burn Your Own Church
Playloder
2007
C+



It's taken so long for Black Strobe to release a debut album that they're not even really the same Black Strobe anymore, having recently jettisoned founding member Ivan Smagghe and moved increasingly towards being a rock band with synths as window dressing, rather than a full-fledged dance outfit. You'd maybe be forgiven for worrying that minus Smagghe's influence, this new gaggle of instrument-toters might struggle to carry Black Strobe's high standards over to a full length—perky French electro-house is serious fucking business, man.

Things start promisingly, with a dose of good old-fashioned terror. "Brenn Di Ega Kjerke" hits upon the brilliant idea of playing the same ominous, rising scale over and over with increasing intensity, using guitars that sound like buzzsaws and synths that sound like guitars that sound like buzzsaws. It's not so much business as usual as business taken to new and terrifying extremes, infusing the goth-house of their prior work with a new level of violence.

Lead single "Shining Bright Star" is closer to the familiar, sleazy grandeur of the *Chemical Sweet Girl* EP, with Arnaud Rebotini growling about how, unlike All Your Friends, he's not a normal guy, and suggesting you might want to get down on your knees for him. His vocals come to dominate the album from here on, with the unalloyed horniness reaching its most absurd peak on a cover of Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man." I stopped paying attention to it for all of 30 seconds and it got my sister pregnant, even though she's dead.

"Last Club on Earth" is one of the best things they've ever done, with colossal, echoing guitar chords and an insistent synth line swooping over a disco beat where the hi-hats and snare hits occasionally convulse all over the place—a perfect evocation of the twitchy, melancholic mania of a man who's been awake since September 2005. Never mind exhaustion: you get the impression that not even death will be a sufficient deterrent for Rebotint—that he will still be here in 2350, grinding away at a set of skeletal remains like some kind of undead Gallic fucking machine. (*Undead Gallic Fucking Machine* will be the title of Black Strobe's second album.)

For the most part though, schlocky industrial guitar stylings shunt the synths to one side, and while the combination works sometimes—like when "Bloodshot Eyes" follows an irritable cry of "I WANT ZIS TO STOP! RIGHT NOW!" with a well-timed rush of fuzz bass and Space Invaders noises—the overriding pattern of slightly daft, constipated-sounding vocals and roided-up powerchords starts to get a bit one-note. Their older work had a kind of perfectly pitched, idealized clubland glamour, whereas this is closer to evoking the actual, harsh reality of being pinned to the floor underneath a sweaty, mulleted French dude while he flexes his muscles and grunts, drowning out the faint sound of your sobbing with a series of snarled, syntactically awkward obscenities.

Uh, yeah: *Burn Your Own Church* is imposing, funny, and intermittently brilliant, but there remains the nagging sense that, as Black Strobe Mk I drift poignantly into the distance and Black Strobe Mk II loom into view in an unsettlingly phallic manner, some of the best bits might have gotten lost in the transition.



Reviewed by: Fergal O'Reilly
Reviewed on: 2007-06-12
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