

Unto Ashes: Songs for a Widow *An Annotated Music Review*

Dr. Thanatos of Ann Arbor
Before the Autumnal Equinox (09.18.06 C.E.)

Created using only materials salvaged by Unacceptable Refuse
More data is available at www.FrequencyMutineers.org

Comments

*"Your remembrances are like **Unto Ashes**, your bodies to bodies of clay" — Job 13:12*

The New York based trio Unto Ashes (Michael Laird, Natalia Lincoln, and Mariko) is currently on tour and their next performance is as headliner at the Court of Lazarus: A Metropolitan Vampire Society. And the Vampiric Court could not have chosen a better lead act as Unto Ashes exemplifies the current gothic/vampire scene: ancient in spirit, modern in practice. Unto Ashes find themselves at the peak of diversity as they approach their decade anniversary. Their latest work "Songs for a Widow" is the fifth full-length album produced by the American group, and like their others it's on the Projekt label (with a simultaneous release in Europe on the Pandaimonium label).

"Songs" is as diverse musically as it is with its allusions (q.v., Notes). Drawing inspiration (and material) from a Mediaeval poet (anonymous), a Florentine scholar (Dante Alighieri), and a synthpop legend (Covenant), the record winds its way through (fifteen relatively short tracks) of funereal dirges, instrumental memorials, and metallic operas using assorted vocal and music styles. Yet one thing remains constant throughout the musical and literary odyssey: a sense of impending doom. This foreboding is maintained with lyrics ("And wear the Death Crown as Autumn falls"), martial beats ("Occupying Force"), and guest musicians playing cello (Catherine Bent), guitar (Katherine Burke), and hurdy gurdy (Melissa Kacalanos) in a manner that evokes a feeling of darkness.

Highlights include the unique take on (and two versions of) Covenant's "One World One Sky" that opens and closes the work as well as "You Will Never Know" and "A Song for a Widow", but the strength of Unto Ashes is the scholarship (both musical and literary) they bring to the whole project and, in fact, to their entire catalog. Such intelligent music is rare in our scene and Unto Ashes have few peers (although Dead Can Dance and Loreena McKennitt come immediately to mind). A minor criticism of this album is that its strong point (diversity) is occasionally a weak link as it is often a rough ride down cascading genres and crashing styles. The tracks are excellent as individual pieces, but they don't always segue well. This caveat seems irrelevant, however, in the age of single-file downloads. And Unto Ashes' unique brand of chamber goth and neo folk deserves heavy rotation in any MP3 (or Compact Disc) player.

Summary: A scholarly and (occasionally too) diverse array of mediaeval-inspired modern folk tales

Reference: Chamber Goth (Amber Asylum, Estampie, Miranda Sex Garden, Rasputina, This Mortal Coil)
Neo Folk (Coil, Current 93, Death in June)

ThanatoScore: 08/10

Dates

09.24.06 New York (Court of Lazarus/Slipper Room)
10.05.06 Munich (Elserhalle)
10.06.06 Genf (Usine)
10.07.06 Zurich (Dynamo)

10.08.06 Ludwigsburg (Musikhalle)

Details

Artist: Unto Ashes
Work: Songs for a Widow
Format: MP3/Compact Disc
Label: Projekt/Pandaimonium
Catalog: Projekt187
Date: 09.19.06

Members: Natalia Lincoln (keyboards, alto vocals)
Mariko (violin, soprano vocals)
Michael Laird (guitar, hammered dulcimer, drums, percussion, hurdy gurdy, recorder, tenor vocals, grim vocals, production on all tracks except "I Am Untouched")

Others: Catherine Bent (cello)
Katherine Burke (guitar, grim vocals)
Melissa Kacalanos (hurdy gurdy)
Curse (live percussionist)
A.J. Tissian (mixing, remixing, mastering)
Joseph Bell (sample)

Art: Kyle Cassidy (portrait)
Systemdra (photography)
Sam Rosenthal (design)

Data:	Track	Time	Title
	01	01.10	One World (Funeral) [Cover]
	02	01.41	My Lord is Born
	03	03.30	Convivio
	04	02.25	Intacta Sum
	05	04.35	The Snow Leopard (In Honor of Michael Cashmore)
	06	05.22	You Will Never Know
	07	01.19	Dream of the Rood (R.I.P. John Balance)
	08	02.57	The Life of this World
	09	01.20	Intermezzo
	10	03.18	Drei Todesarten
	11	03.56	Song for a Widow
	12	03.05	Occupying Force
	13	03.12	I Am Untouched
	14	00.56	In Memoriam Robert Luscombe
	15	04.13	One World One Sky [Cover]
		43.16	

Notes

The entire work was recorded at Non Plus and Grand Street Studio in New York City.

Track 01 [Instrumental] was originally written by Eskil Simonsson and performed by Covenant (Covenant/United States of Mind/Dependent/02.02.00). This version was arranged by M. Laird.

Track 02 [Male Vocals in English, Neo Folk Style] was written by M. Laird/N. Lincoln (music) and N. Lincoln (words).

Track 03 [Female Vocals in Italian] was written by M. Laird/Mariko and features the words of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321 C.E.) from “Il Convivio”. Il Convivio (“The Banquet”) was written in about 1304 C.E. and contains commentaries on poetry dealing with philosophical, moral, ethical, and political issues. It also contains frequent references to Platom the Greek philosopher. The section lifted translates roughly as follows.

My song, I think your admirers will be rare
Who'll rightly understand your words?
So difficult and complex is your speech.
If it happens to be
That you should find yourself with some
Who do not grasp what you mean
I pray you then, dear newborn song,
Take courage again and say to them:
"Consider at least how beautiful I am!"

Track 04 [Female Chants in Latin] was written by N. Lincoln (words and music) and presents the same lyrics as Track 13. “Intacta sum” sometimes means “intact hymen” (i.e., still a virgin) and the other lyrics translate loosely as “Lord, Have Mercy”. These lines appear to reference the Borgia family (esp., Lucrezia Borgia) in Italy who are usually taken to exemplify Machiavellian politics.

Track 05 [Instrumental] was written by M. Laird/C. Bent (music) and is dedicated to Michael Cashmore of Current 93.

Track 06 [Female Vocals in English, Black Metal Style] was written by M. Laird/K. Burke/Mariko/N. Lincoln (music) and M. Laird/N.Lincoln/Mariko (words).

Track 07 [Instrumental] was written by M. Laird and is a memorial to John Balance of Coil (1962-2004 C.E.).

Track 08 [Male Vocals, Neo Folk Style] was written by M. Laird/Mariko/N. Lincoln (music) and contains words by an anonymous 13th Century C.E. English poet chanted in the background by female voices.

Track 09 [Instrumental] contains a sample of an early 78 rpm record (circa., 1886 C.E.) provided by J. Bell.

Track 10 [Female Vocals in German, Heavenly Voices Style] was written by M. Laird/Mariko/N. Lincoln (music) and N. Lincoln (words). The title of this track means “Three Deaths”.

Track 11 [Male Vocals, Neo Folk Style] was written by M. Laird/N. Lincoln (music) and M. Laird (words).

Track 12 [Female Vocals in English] was written by M. Laird/Mariko (music) and N. Lincoln/M. Laird (words).

Track 13 [Female Vocals in Latin, Electronica Style] was written by N. Lincoln/A.J. Tissian (music) and N. Lincoln (words). It presents the same lyrics as Track 4 and was produced by N. Lincoln/A.J. Tissian.

Track 14 [Instrumental] was written by Mariko/N. Lincoln (music). The title may reference the recent death of Robert A. Loscombe (1970-2006 C.E.) of Astoria, New York.

Track 15 [Male Vocals] was originally written by Eskil Simonsson and performed by Covenant (Covenant/United States of Mind/Dependent/02.02.00). This version was arranged by M. Laird.