

Mogwai  
Gagarin Club, Athens  
February 20, 2009

Mogwai: Fun With Nihilism!

Producer/musician Brian Eno in his 1986 book *More Dark Than Shark* theorized that all pop and rock music in the near future will be instrumental in its construction. Eno was the 1970s production equivalent of 1980s Steve Lillywhite (Siouxsie and the Banshees, XTC, U2) and 1990s Butch Vig (Smashing Pumpkins, Nirvana, Garbage). His production work with bands like Talking Heads, mid-period U2, David Bowie and James have earned him pantheon status in the recording industry business. His 1983 solo release album, *Apollo*, is considered as the touchstone masterpiece of the ambient genre of music. Although the instrumental band Mogwai uses ambient, as well as metal and noise genre material in their music, I'm sure the members of this band are great admirers of Eno's work, and it shows perfectly in their live performance.

Their way-past sold-out show at Gagarin club on February 20 showcased the band's formidable live playing skills, along with many fun optical treats such as strobe lights, dry ice clouds and swirling, clustered spotlights. Their playing style and influences, to me, seems to range from three specific artists, all of whom have elements of clean hopelessness, mixed with just enough gallows humor in their work to keep their product from becoming over-maudlin and heavy handed. Besides the jovially-grim twinkle of Eno's ambient influence, their sound borrows heavily from the 1990s phenomenon band Smashing Pumpkins and cult superstars My Bloody Valentine. Both of these bands incorporated elements of Cartesian "trapped in subjectivity" mindsets in their work. Billy Corgan, Smashing Pumpkin's guitarist and songwriter, wrote the book on loneliness and self-doubt. My Bloody Valentine incorporated many crunching, minor key instrumental tracks in their exaggeratedly multi-tracked album work, which sounds remarkably like the live show sound generated by Mogwai's three outstanding guitarists, Stuart Braithwaite, John Cummings and Barry Burns.

Corgan's reverb-less, super-dry, woodcracking guitar sound and style on Butch Vig produced albums such as *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* and *Siamese Dream* mirror the style used by Mogwai on many of their live pieces. A good number of the evening's songs began with lilting, madrigal-esque intros which, at the crack of a drum rim-shot, explode into short bursts of titaninc electric guitar sound. Producer Vig, and probably Eno too, would more than likely be proud of the Mogwais for their incorporation of Corgan's guitar style into very listenable, instrumental, almost pop chart pieces which give homage to the great artist's work, without directly plagiarising from it.

Glasgow, Scotland, Mogwai's homeland, must be something of an interesting place. The kind of existential-heavy, yet funky-beat playful mentality of their album material is very similar to the only other modern cultural reference I have of Scotland, which is the novel/soundtrack/film treatment of author Irvine Welsh's noire laugh-riot *Trainspotting*. The theme of trying to feel good, despite being surrounded by utter strangeness, dealing with incomprehensible, yet supposedly civilized behavior and conformity to an environment that systematically de-humanizes people presents itself emotionally in their

work. But the seed crystal of trying to have some kind of twisted fun with the insanity is, also, always present in their material. With song titles such as "I Love You, I'm Going to Blow-up Your School," and "I'm Jim Morrison, I'm Dead," how could it not be?

Big-rock kudos go to Mogwai's rhythm section Dominic Aitchison on bass and Martin Bulloch on drums. It is a rare treat in rock when you find two guys who give pure, foundational grounding to the songs without the players becoming flashy, fruity or just giving-in to playing piles of extra Stanley Clarke-esque notes, simply because they can. A good engine room is hard to find, and the Mogwais have one of the best.

Many of the evening's selections were off of their newest CD release, *The Hawk is Howling*. And, I must add, another good reason to like the Mogwais is that you can hear in entirety, and purchase for a few pennies, individual songs from their new CD off of their Myspace page without having to buy the entire album. They may be smirking nihilists, but they definitely give you options and good value for your entertainment dollar.

The night's show opened with local instrumental rock band Misuse. They delivered a very impressive set of heavy Pink Floyd influenced, sound-treatment rock. If you like Pink Floyd's material from their *Umma Gumma*, *Atom Heart Mother* and *Obscured by Clouds* creative periods, they are well worth your time and effort to investigate.