

civilians Joe Henry

[Archives](#) | [Staff](#) | [About](#) | [The Stypod](#) | [Staff Blogs](#) | [Recommends](#)

Alan Sparhawk

Solo Guitar
Silber
2006
B



It's unfortunate that Alan Sparhawk chose to give his first album apart from Low such a bland title. Calling it *Solo Guitar* makes it seem like an exercise, a frivolous release of aimless noodling with the focus on the player and instrument rather than on the music. In reality, it's a frightfully powerful experience, with Sparhawk caressing and torturing his instrument to produce a fantastic collection of minimalist guitar that unfolds like a terse yet evocative short story. Eschewing any kind of recognizable structure, Sparhawk indulges in elemental fragments of sound with long, droning expanses interspersed with frantic, thrashing fits of colic and foreboding silences that contain an unsettling emptiness, like the quiet drawing back of water that precedes a destructive and crushing wave.

In only a minute and a half, "How the Weather Comes over the Hillside," simmers quietly and emblazons Sparhawk's intentions firmly and distinctly upon the stark canvas of silence. "Sagrado Corazon de Jesu" leaves behind the brevity of the first track, with a persistent drone establishing a fertile bed, out of which well-spaced squalls emerge like lightning-flashes, burning and blazing for nanoseconds and leaving their afterglow hanging in the senses long after they've dissipated. It's a physical experience as much as an aural one. The low-frequency tones are felt in the bones long before they rattle the eardrums. These sounds aren't simply being played or coaxed from Sparhawk's instrument; they're being wrenched free as if through struggle.

"Sagrado," along with a heavily deconstructed and disassembled cover of Van Halen's "Eruption" are the only digressions from the larger theme of the album. That theme, of a battered and bruised freighter skimming across dark and endless seas toward safe harbor only to be torn asunder by pursuing storms, only explicitly exists in the extended song titles. Despite the obscure framing, those songs, anchored by the seventeen-minute "How a Freighter Comes into the Harbor," are a remarkable triumph of suggestive storytelling and highlights the potential that minimalist composition can have in the hands of cautious and attentive composers.

While Kawabata Makoto's 2002 experiments with the Tsurubami and Rebels Powers charted similar territory but seemed to pointlessly spin their wheels, Sparhawk realizes the importance of firm control over his output. Like fellow minimalists 1 Mile North (who also explore the austerity of a harbor on the magnificent *Conduction Convection Radiation* collaboration with The Wind-Up Bird and Colophon), the music on *Solo Guitar* is imbued with narrative subtext and informed by thoughtful plotting that gives it more impact than any lyrical treatment possibly could.

Solo Guitar is challenging and requires that listeners surrender their expectations, allowing themselves to be completely submerged. While some may find it uncomfortable at first, the level of development at work on this album is a thrilling treat, and such fine musical and artistic experiences are not to be ignored or avoided.



Reviewed by: Michael Patrick Brady
Reviewed on: 2006-07-13
Comments (0)

Recent Reviews By This Author

- Idgy Vaughn - Origin Story
- Wooden Wand & the Sky High Band - Second Attention

Today on Stylus

Reviews

August 30th, 2007

- Crowded House - Time on Earth
- Odd Nosdam - Level Live Wires
- False - 2007
- Mother and the Addicts - Science...

Features

August 30th, 2007

- Vs. - Stop Making Sense vs. The Last...
- Movie Review - Ghost Rider

Recently on Stylus

Reviews

August 29th, 2007

- Angels of Light - We Are Him
- Minus the Bear - Planet of Ice
- Beatallica - Sgt. Hetfield's...
- Waldteufel - Sanguis

August 28th, 2007

- Liars - Liars
- Spokane - Little Hours
- Wiley - Playtime Is Over
- Various Artists - I Would Write a...

Features

August 28th, 2007

- The Diamond - The Beatles - 1
- Movie Review - LOL
- Movie Review - Hannah Takes the Stairs
- Interview - Rubens
- Interview - Young Marble Giants
- Movie Review - A Woman Without Love /...

August 27th, 2007

- Seconds - Stars - Heart
- Movie Review - Superbad
- Article - Ghettech: The Bluffer's...

Recent Music Reviews

- Liars - Liars
- Rilo Kiley - Under the Blacklight
- M.I.A. - Kala
- Caribou - Andorra
- Okkervil River - The Stage Names
- Tegan and Sara - The Con
- Yeah Yeah Yeahs - Is Is EP
- Prince - Planet Earth
- The Smashing Pumpkins - Zeitgeist
- The Beastie Boys - The Mix-Up
- Interpol - Our Love to Admire
- Spoon - Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga
- T.I. - T.I. vs. T.I.P.
- Ryan Adams - Easy Tiger
- Simian Mobile Disco - Attack Decay...

Recent Movie Reviews

- Hannah Takes the Stairs - Joe Swanberg