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A.S. 'Exile' – Review.

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A.S. 'Exile'

Sophomore album from French duo A.S. has been a long time coming, due to personal issues for both members of the band. Nick McRoberts and Idriss Halafoui describe 'Exile' as a "labour of love for more than two years". It shows too; the album is an exquisitely crafted piece, with lavish arrangements and crisp production the order of the day from the word go. There's an interesting blend of styles on 'Exile' too; the most obvious comparisons being early Radiohead and Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, but there are echoes too of Oasis, particularly on 'Do What You Want' which at least until the main body of the instrumentation kicks in is scarily reminiscent of the Mancunians uber-hit 'Wonderwall'. McRoberts' voice is haunting, yet uplifting, clearly heard on the album's title track. It's here too that Halafoui begins to shine, his guitar parts lending the music more than enough edge to set A.S. apart from their contemporaries. It's never invasive though and his intricately woven lines and chords complement the rest of the instrumentation absolutely perfectly.

The vocals on 'Time' echo indie stalwarts Interpol; downbeat and monochrome, although here they are also drowned with delay. 'Fast' skates along atop a skittering break beat to the point where you're expecting a chorus or b section tempo change that never quite arrives, and invites us to "watch the darkness from inside, try to hold on to your pride"; one of the album's highlights 'Probable Cause' duplicitously opens with a gentle beat and an immediately jarring dischordant piano motif. It develops in the verses to a deep vocal that's palpable with *something* repressed. An immaculate string arrangement leads us to a deliciously grandiose Muse style chorus that sends shivers through every inch of your body. The melancholic guitar and whisper right in your ear vocal that opens 'Invisible Kiss' has the same effect; the song ebbs and flows like the tide and it's absolutely intoxicating. 'Pleasure And Pain' could be the perfect scene setter for a gritty crime thriller. It's minor key piano and vocal evoke imagines of a big city, at night, in the rain, with a man watching from the window; singing what he sees – "waiting as the rain runs down the glass"

and “watching as the drunk man makes a pass” and musing “it’s such a small world, don’t you know”. Around a minute in, the chorus appears – the piano is joined by a textural guitar and McRoberts’ vocals shift up a gear, and every hair on your entire body will stand to attention, spellbound to hear the rest of his tale.

‘Fall In’, the longest track on the album by a clear margin follows the now familiar template of gentle, atmospheric instrumentation and that all important vocal key change for the chorus. It’s probably the most accessible track on the album, when the tempo changes and the jangly piano kicks in its verging on the territory of being poppy. The boisterously titled ‘Why The Hell Not?’ is the major key sound of a man who’s got it badly for somebody; “I’ve already said too much, I’m still dreaming of your touch”; yet McRoberts manages not to sound cliché. The album closes with ‘Reasonable Doubts’. It’s labelled as an acoustic version, although this is somewhat misleading – halfway through we are greeted by a soft bass and subtle strings. Here though is where we really get to see both members shine; Idriss Halafoui’s dextrous fingerpicking throughout complements McRoberts’ assertions that “we all have reasonable doubts”.

If there’s one criticism to be made of A.S., it’s their lyrics. That’s not to say they are bad, by any stretch, but in places they sound rather obvious and it comes across a little as though they were considered as an afterthought. That said they serve their purpose, and there is something to be said for lyrics that get straight to the point rather than burying the message beneath mountains of unnecessary hyperbole.

‘Exile’ is a solid album, with many things to recommend it. The production is almost faultless, the instrumentation exquisitely crafted. It’s not immediately accessible yet this isn’t to its detriment. It offers something new with every listen, and after a couple of spins you will be utterly captivated.

3.5/5

‘Exile’ was released on March 4th.

Here’s the video for first single ‘Do What You Want’.