

Rediscover: Mount Eerie: No Flashlight

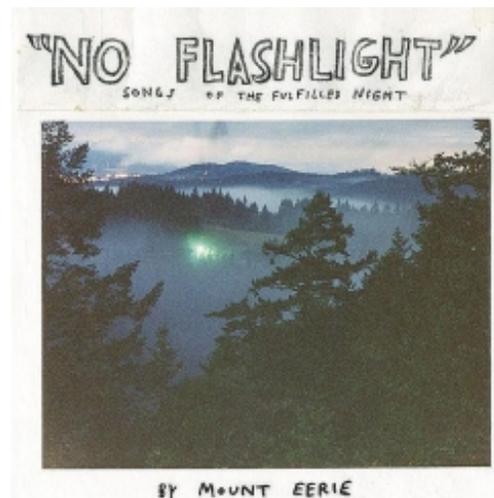
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7/24/2017

“*There are two lakes,*” sings Phil Elverum on “(2 Lakes)” from the first Mount Eerie record, *No Flashlight*. One everybody knows; it’s found on maps, filled with boats. Knowing Elverum, the other lake is going to scare the shit out of us. And sure enough: “*The second lake was fed by a bottomless spring/and still has never been seen.*”

So we’re left with two mysteries: the bottom of the spring, and the lake itself. These are the kind of questions Elverum lives for: the ones about the unknowable universe that stretches outward from home. His work is filled with clues that might explain everything if we could only catch up with them: the foghorn on *The Glow, Pt. 2*; the bell in the hills on *Clear Moon*. On the cover of *No Flashlight*, there’s a green light dancing distantly in a dark forest. If Elverum could walk to the light, would it soothe his search for meaning? We scan the cover, and our eyes wander from the light to the flicker of towns and radio towers beyond the forest. There’s always more to know.



No Flashlight is not one of the better Mount Eerie albums, and it’s a running joke among fans how bad the lyrics are. It opens with the line “*no one will ever understand these songs,*” which isn’t terribly promising. Throughout, Elverum’s fumbling to explain everything, or pretending to. ““*No Flashlight*” means that there’s another world and it’s inside this one,” he sings on the title track. Good to know. The decision to end many of these songs abruptly on a lyric doesn’t help. “*I’ll sing my song in the parking lot,*” he cries out at the end of “How?” When the song ended the listener wasn’t pondering the poetry of the line but instead imagining Elverum screaming cryptic gibberish outside a WinCo.

But even the lesser Mount Eerie albums are like stretches of forest where there’s nothing to look at—not terribly enlightening, but still the forest and still awe-inspiring. What *No Flashlight* does so well is cast the same spell of elemental dread as all the best Eerie albums. *No Flashlight* does this nearly as well as better albums like *Clear Moon* and *The Glow Pt. 2*, and it redeems most of its flaws by imparting the feeling of being lost in an infinite, frightening continuum we can never fully understand. Part of the spell comes from all the lyrics about mountains and moons and distance and darkness, but Elverum’s always had a knack for crafting music that *sounds* like being lost.

The music is deep and haunting, mostly built around gently scraped acoustic guitar and the tactile tap of hand drums. On most Elverum records you can hear the instruments being played and identify each one pretty clearly; there’s an appealing crudeness to his music, as if his songs were cobbled together from driftwood and stones and left to the elements deep in the forest. *No Flashlight* is quiet and ominous, though “Universe is Shown” explodes with martial drums and “Moan” introduces the Mount Eerie tradition of recording songs with as many friends as possible, all howling along (*Singers*, the next Mount Eerie release, would stretch this concept across an entire album).

Mount Eerie is more a proper band or collective than the Microphones, and there’s often a small flock of singers following the leader. This collaborative spirit probably stems from the operatic role Elverum assigned friends like Karl Blau and Calvin Johnson on *Mount Eerie*, the mini-opera that wrapped up the Microphones name. That album ended with Elverum dying and being born again in the arms of the universe. But Mount Eerie isn’t Elverum coming through the other side, altered but alive. He may have gazed into the face of the universe itself—but that second lake has still never been seen.

