

# Hercules & Love Affair: Omnion

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We'll always miss the Greek glam and high camp that defined Hercules & Love Affair's 2008 self-titled debut, one of the best disco albums ever, regardless of time period or place. But the new, subtler Hercules looks a lot better now than on 2011's tremendously underwhelming *Blue Songs*. And if the collective's starting to look more like a workhorse, it's at least a consistent one, still capable of putting out some top-tier disco.

*Omnion* is the fourth Hercules album. It's not as fun as 2014's great *Feast for the Broken Heart*—and a lot less “gay” if that's what you're looking for. But it makes up for it with higher emotional stakes, more genre-hopping devilry, and the most impressive vocal chops on a Hercules record since Anohni's colossal contributions to the debut.

The only returning singer is Rouge Mary, the French singer who should be as big as her voice. Think classic-house diva gone crunk, and when she sings through an ear-splitting filter on “Rejoice,” she sounds 50 feet tall. She brings vivid life to “Rejoice” and “Wildchild,” whose hooks might otherwise be flimsy. Singers risk phoning in their vocals on guest-centric dance projects like this, but Mary sells her cuts with conviction.

An unexpected surprise comes from leader Andy Butler's voice, untrained and confident as he recounts his history of addiction on “Fools Wear Crowns.” It's a great, deeply personal moment that recalls John Grant reckoning with his HIV-positive status on “I Try to Talk to You” from *Feast*. Like on that song, Butler doesn't heap on the melodramatic cues of confessional songwriting. It's not exactly a dancefloor-slayer, but it's brisk enough you might miss what he's talking about, making the lyrics hit that much harder once you notice them.

Scanning the track list, it's hard to ignore the preponderance of Arab voices: not just of the Lebanese band Mashrou' Leila, which sings the astonishing “Are You Still Certain” in Arabic, but also of Rouge Mary, who is of Algerian descent, and the Horrors' Palestinian-British frontman Faris Badwan, who does a great Marc Almond impression on his two cuts. It's a moot point as to whether or not this is a “statement” or even on purpose; inclusion is a statement in itself, and disco has long been a refuge for the most marginalized.

The least effective singer—surprisingly—is Sharon Van Etten, the brassy-voiced indie rocker who'd theoretically make for a great disco diva. She sounds uncharacteristically thin on “Omnion,” a sort of disco-fied variation on the rock 'n' roll 1-4 jam format. A new recruit named Gustaph is also sadly anonymous and gets the mic most out of anyone; save his atmospheric “Epilogue,” I wouldn't complain if any of his contributions were cut.

Hercules & Love Affair is still “disco,” but Butler has some surprises up his sleeve. “Running,” with Icelandic sister act Sísý Ey, resembles the ambient house of early Biosphere and conjures up strings strangely reminiscent of Solange's “Cranes in the Sky.” Badwan's “Controller” revels in both black-clad kink and Bubba Gump kitsch not far from Blondie's “The Tide is High.” And “Rejoice” boasts a gnarled acid bassline that reminds us Hercules once counted Meat Beat Manifesto's Mark Pistel as a member.

Branching out like this might have been the best move for Hercules to make as it nears its 10th year as a band. But there's a risk the project might lose its identity. This is their first album that doesn't hew strictly to a certain sound, and the ones it employs are so far removed from those in which the band dabbled on its debut there's a risk of hearing *Omnion* and having no idea who it's by. It's a good sign when a band adeptly branches out into places it's



never gone before—less so when it tries to go everywhere at once.

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