

Eluvium: Shuffle Drones

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Shuffle Drones is a great idea and a progressive one in that it embraces streaming, the bane of so many musicians, rather than reacting against it. The concept is simple and brilliant. Play the 23 tracks on shuffle, and they'll flow into each other no matter the order, meaning you'll get a different album on each listen. But an album as high-concept as this either works or it doesn't, and *Shuffle Drones* fails in a few conspicuous areas.

Firstly, when the album's played on shuffle, there's a split-second gap between each 30-second movement that makes it obvious when one transitions to the next and physically breaks up what's meant to be an unnoticeable transition. Ironically, this isn't an issue when the tracks are played in the order they're presented. Eluvium tells us on Spotify, ostensibly the intended platform for this thing, to turn the crossfade to zero. But turning it to two or three or 10 seconds actually improves the flow between the tracks.

Secondly, the human brain has an idea of how long 30 seconds is, meaning we end up mentally preparing ourselves to catch the break between two movements, and those 30 seconds are filled with suspense. Instead of the amniotic drift we expect from good ambient, the experience of listening to the album becomes a tense anticipation-release cycle. If the bits of drone were, say, three minutes long, this might not be such an irritant.

Finally, Eluvium fails to find a creative way to connect the drones. They all start and stop on the same sound, blossoming into an orchestral filigree in the middle, so of course they segue into each other. About half of the album ends up being that one sound, and even if we find a way to make the tracks flow seamlessly and don't have a mental perception of how long 30 seconds is, we can still tell when the drones start and stop.

It'd be more impressive if Eluvium dared himself to drift as far from his starting point as possible. Another similar monkey wrench in the album format from this year is King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard's *Nonagon Infinity*, which is meant to be played as an infinite loop, and what made that album so impressive is how far it strayed before it had to link back up with itself in a way that made sense. If *Nonagon Infinity* began and ended on the same sound, it'd be a cop-out, and that's what *Shuffle Drones* feels like.

Maybe Eluvium's simply bitten off more than he can chew and making an album that plays well no matter the order is impossible. But I'd love to see a brash young producer steal this idea, run wild with it and bring it to its conclusion. If Eluvium's trying to "disrupt modern listening," as he claims to in the thesis he spells out in the track titles, I'm sure he wouldn't mind if someone ripped him off. Then we can remember *Shuffle Drones* as the birth of something great, keeping it in our hearts but its progeny in our headphones.

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