

OCS: Memory of a Cut Off Head

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John Dwyer's been itchy in the skin of Thee Oh Sees for some time. When the band's generally- acknowledged classic run—*Castlemania* through *Floating Coffin*, conservatively—ended, he cycled through all manner of ominous stunts: moving to L.A., putting his band on comically short hiatus, coming back on the tepidly received *Drop*, changing the name of his band to Oh Sees, and, now, going back to OCS for the first time in more than a decade, he embarks on the most radical left turn since first embracing juggernaut garage rock on 2008's pivotal *The Master's Bedroom is Worth Spending A Night In*.

Maybe it's a one-time thing, but total 180s like this are rare in the Dwyer catalog, which has long defined itself by incremental developments on a molasses-slow scale. *Orc*, their album as Oh Sees, was every bit the next step after the proggy, longer, weirder forays on *A Weird Exits* and *An Odd Entrances*. That name change seemed to mean nothing; does it this time around?

Memory of a Cut Off Head is a psych-folk album of the sort Dwyer was making around 2005 when he first stepped out under the OCS moniker. It's a little more hi-fi than those, but it retains an intimacy lost in the rock-band squall of Thee Oh Sees. Brigid Dawson, Dwyer's longtime second-in-command, is more visible than ever here. They sing most of the album in unison, like a psych version of the Mountain Goats' *Sweden*.

It's interesting hearing the two take on the ornate genre of psych folk with hardly any pretension. Artists in this genre typically throw good taste to the dogs. Here, it sounds like they made some recordings on the edge of a bed and added violin and the other filigrees in post-production.

This is the stuff one-off dreams are made of. But is it a one-off? It's possible this is the new look Dwyer wants for his band. If so, it's not a good one. Dwyer's better at rock than folk, which was obvious when he released the first OCS and Oh Sees recordings while in the great rock band Coachwhips. A lot of what makes him so good at making rock is lost in the transition to folk, his knack for relentless linear motion, for one. The best Thee Oh Sees songs feel like hurtling headfirst into a dimly lit tunnel at high speed. It's a unique feeling I haven't experienced from any other rock music, though some techno does the trick. Here, the tracks are oddly stagnant. They don't change much, and the beats pit-pat politely without really driving the songs forward.

Dwyer's also not much of a lyricist. He seems to be aiming for impressionism here, but it doesn't end up making much of an impression. It's good rock doggerel, but the folk setting misplaces the focus. The careful unison between the two singers means the clunkers land harder. Who ever thought "*we're junkies for despair*" could be a good chorus, even in this lugubrious era?

I'm hopeful. The band's fans would be awfully miffed if Oh Sees cut off their batshit live gigs to play sit-down shows in small concert halls. And even if OCS becomes a thing (again), perhaps this is a baby step forward and in three or four albums we'll have some sort of modern-day psych-folk masterwork. In the meantime, they'd do us a great favor by tossing a follow-up to *Orc* our way.

- Label:
Castle Face



- Release Date:
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