

Stef Chura: Messes (Reissue)

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What a voice Detroit's Stef Chura has: an elastic, filigreed thing that puts intelligibility dead last on its list of priorities to revel in its potential as a psychedelic instrument. She wails, switches accents and stretches simple turns of phrase into abstract sewer sludge. She'll pronounce an innocuous phrase like "down the road" with perfect clarity on one chorus ("Slow Motion") and on the next turn it into a buffalo grunt. This is less of a rock 'n' roll vocal than a hot slurry poured over the music and left to bubble and seethe. It's a master class in vocal trolling, and it's no wonder she's called her debut album *Messes*.



This is unusual in today's indie rock climate, which tends to favor the Lou Reed approach to singing—sacrificing as much artifice as the singer can afford. Chura's voice is more like Nico in a black hole, or perhaps Chrissie Hynde mixed with Young Thug. Instead of using the music as a means of communicating the lyrics, Chura leaves it up to the listener to sift out what's a poignant turn of phrase and what's syllable soup. Her frequent unintelligibility invites repeat listens. This is a scenery-chewing performance that seems destined to provoke extreme reactions. You'll either be enthralled by the way she exploits the muscles in her mouth and throat or you'll read it as mere caterwauling.

Chura's got a deft ear for pop songs. "You" is catchy as hell, even if the hook scans as "Song 2"-style nonsense at first. But a lot of these tracks, like "Human Being," are more like shapeless puddles of sound. Listeners might be content to let *Messes* register as ambient music on the first listen before digging for deeper meaning, but it's still not always clear what Chura's songs are about. They open up a slightly skewed dream-world, and lines like "*someday they're gonna know you're a human being*" make sense until you realize how vague they are. The dominant songwriting style right now in most pop disciplines from rap to rock is hyper-specificity; Chura's abstractions are refreshing.

This is the kind of album that could conceivably be recorded in a day in a garage, but it's still mysterious and seems to make itself known from the other side of a glass. It could be a worthy entry point into modern indie rock for listeners versed in more psychedelic styles of music. While this type of DIY album is often raw and confessional, *Messes* doesn't require a lot of emotional commitment and is easy to just throw on to have something to listen to for half an hour. This is an album listeners will likely return to as comfort food even while more ambitious works become their favorites.

Messes has been reissued by the venerable Saddle Creek label, home of Hop Along and Big Thief, scarcely a year after its original release in January 2017. This is a strange gambit, but it's a canny one. Saddle Creek could have simply signed Chura and hedged their bets on her second album, but a lot of DIY, '90s-indebted rock albums were released in 2017, and Chura's slipped right through the cracks. Saddle Creek must have determined the best way to sell Chura's music would be to have as many people hear it as possible. This is a smart move, as few who hear this record will easily forget it.

- Label:
Saddle Creek
- Release Date:
February 2, 2018