

Review: Now Only by Mount Eerie

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Mar 26, 2018

NOW ONLY



BY MOUNT EERIE

The Mount Eerie mythology is over, and the shadow of Geneviève Elverum's passing now hangs inexorably over Phil Elverum's project. Last year's *A Crow Looked At Me* found Elverum reckoning not only with the loss of his wife but the treatment of death in his art. The Mount Eerie project itself was born from a death: Elverum's himself, as he climbed *Mount Eerie* on the final *Microphones* album that gave the project its name to die Ziggy Stardust-style and be reborn in the arms of the universe. "Do you see what happens when big black Death breathes

on you with its breath?” blustered Little Wings’ Kyle Field on that record, panting into the microphone while surrounded by operatic hoo-hahs. It was an ambitious album, often musically dazzling, but it was essentially rock-opera theater. What once seemed awe-inspiring and terrifying might now, even to reverent fans, seem as contrived as Romeo plunging a collapsible dagger into his guts.

Elverum’s reconciliation was to make an album that made a show of somehow not being art. “Death is real,” *Crow*’s opening line, was last year’s most quoted indie-rock lyric. Less widely shared was the line that came next: “It’s not for singing about/it’s not for making into art.” Never mind that Elverum had just made an entire concept album about his wife’s death, made in part with his wife’s instruments. It seemed at best like a problem Elverum had yet to work through, at worst like a preemptive defense against charges of exploiting his wife’s memory in the name of art. *Crow* wasn’t exploitative—it felt like a necessary unburdening—but the fact remained that it was a work of art, and Elverum’s attempt to distance himself from that truth seemed dishonest.

Now Only, Elverum’s second Mount Eerie album since Geneviève’s passing, is Elverum’s reconciliation with art. Geneviève’s death dominates the record no less than on *Crow*, but this time, Elverum’s self-consciousness about his role as an artist manifests itself not through denial but through self-examination. He admits that he writes these “death songs” in part because it’s the next best thing to having her back, and he looks bitterly at the absurdity of having to pay the bills with this art made from pain. *Crow* was a breakthrough from Elverum, edging him up a tier from cult hero to central figure in the indie consciousness. These anti-entertainment songs have ironically furthered his career as an entertainer, so here he is, flying around the country to “play death songs to people on drugs” and schmooze backstage with Skrillex and Father John Misty.

This is one of the most honest albums ever made about life as a touring musician. Unlike in pop and rap, rock’s standards of authenticity often require artists to distance themselves from the fact that they’re famous. But fame is an unavoidable part of Elverum’s life, one that doesn’t necessarily gel well with the burden of grief. He’s a long way from the carefree days of his early success, when he was barely of drinking age and already making masterpieces like 2001’s *The Glow, Pt. 2*. That record sounded like it was made by a psychedelic hermit in communion with the universe, but Elverum lays waste to that fantasy, portraying his 23-year-old self as a naïve self-styled bohemian touring and having one-night stands to escape from his own mortality. When he compares himself to Kerouac, it’s not as a poet but as a self-mythologizing asshole.

Mount Eerie has always been primarily concerned with space—the size of the universe. The post-mythological Mount Eerie is more interested in time. *Crow* was a strictly chronological account of the months after Geneviève’s death, punctuated by Elverum keeping count of how many days it’s been since his world shattered. *Now Only* moves through time heedlessly. It opens with a fond memory of how he and Geneviève met (“Tintin in Tibet”), and as the next track “Distortion” opens, Elverum’s a child, reading from Psalm 23 at his great-grandfather’s funeral. He even visits the far future: on “Two Paintings By Nikolai Astrup,” he loses himself in

a plane crash fantasy where post-apocalyptic stragglers root through his belongings. Then he reprimands himself: "I know the mess actual death causes." The word "actual" rings through the record, delineating the way we tend to romanticize death and the flat absurdity of the real thing.

The album's chronological sweep is matched by the size of its songs. The album's 43 minutes are divided among six tracks that flirt with and often surpass the ten-minute mark. While *Crow* went out of its way to avoid affectations, *Now Only* is almost proggy, and though large chunks of the record are still devoted to simple acoustic guitar and singing, we can hear many familiar elements from past Eerie records: black-metal blizzards of guitar, ominous organs, clattering drums. Personal art often tends to shirk from aesthetic whimsy, as if in reverence to the weight of its subject matter, but Elverum's realized art about pain doesn't have to be ascetic. Pleasure for the listener is probably moot for a project like this, but Elverum has an instinctive gift for immersive, imagistic arrangements, and it's wonderful to hear him indulge it again on *Now Only*.

The Mount Eerie mythology had a failsafe effect that justified the ideas of Elverum's that didn't work, and lesser Mount Eerie albums like *No Flashlight* and *Dawn* came across as less inspiring stretches of a vast forest. With the mythos gone, his less inspired musical decisions stick out. The chorus of "Now Only," with its contrast of grim lyrics and a jaunty guitar strum, comes a little too close to Andrew Jackson Jihad territory for comfort. And Elverum's delivery, a melodic but rhymeless ramble, can be enthralling but is also directly reminiscent of Mark Kozelek's singing style on his similarly stream-of-consciousness records like *Benji*, especially when he double-tracks his vocals. Though Elverum probably isn't trying to evoke Kozelek's work, it can be a little bit disconcerting hearing lyrics so specific to its creator delivered in such a familiar style.

But these are minor quibbles, and if listeners might not go back to *Now Only* as much as *The Glow Pt. 2* and *Clear Moon* it's less because of the skill of its making and more because this isn't really music meant to be obsessed over and played over and over again. It's music necessary for its creator rather than fans, and albums like these invite empathy and admiration more than visceral enjoyment. Many will see it as *Crow Pt. 2*, which is fair, and there's no telling when or if Elverum will go back to spinning fantasies about the vastness of the universe. It'd be a stretch to say he's doing better, but at least he's figuring things out, and that's a good sign. **B PLUS**

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