

Belong: October Language

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When the New Orleans duo *Belong* dropped *October Language* in 2006, it was invariably mentioned in the context of Hurricane Katrina, despite being recorded before the disaster. It became a sort of *Disintegration Loops* for Katrina, but while William Basinski actively encouraged people to connect his decayed-tape epic with the September 11th attacks, *Belong* didn't mention it at all. Ostensibly, a new Spectrum Spools reissue of *October Language* should rectify this problem and allow the album to stand free of context and simply be enjoyed as an album rather than a package of meaning.

Unfortunately, *October Language* now struggles against a different context—that of everything that's happened in ambient music since its release. Six months after *October Language* came out, Tim Hecker released *Harmony in Ultraviolet* and ambient's center of gravity shifted closer to blurred-out shoegaze and white-hot noise. There are a lot of albums that sound like *October Language* in 2018—by Hecker as well as Rafael Anton Irisarri, Jefre Cantu-Ledesma and Yellow Swans—and this old warhorse might have trouble making itself known with these other options a click away.

That's not to say *October Language* doesn't have anything going for it. It has an almost dainty

attention to detail, for one. Individual sounds account for some of the most memorable moments, like the keening guitar on the title track or the familiar pneumatic synths from the Art of Noise's "Moments in Love" (and Katy Perry's "Dark Horse") that puff up out of the depths of "Red Velvet or Nothing." And far from being a mindless blur, there's a clear delineation between the harmonic and textural elements: a thick drone at the center of the stereo field while static and hiss swim at the margins.

It might even convert some of those for whom this school of ambient is too abrasive and not amniotic enough. Noise is used sparingly enough to give this music some breathing room, and tracks four through six pass by in a fog of barely-there ambience. Track seven, "All Equal Now," starts out in that vein before a thick tide of noise subsumes it. It's an effect less like the dramatic crescendos Hecker favors and more like the waves coming in to wash away the footprints on the sand, and indeed the album has a tidal quality that may further explain why Katrina so quickly jumped to listeners' minds after its release.

But is this enough for it to make a splash in today's ambient scene? Hecker's albums (and Fennesz's) are far more emotionally resonant, Irisarri's are more evocative and haunting, Cantu-Ledesma's are more viscerally pretty. It's not even *Belong's* best album; that title goes to 2008's *Colorloss Record*, a stunning collection of obscure '60s psych-pop covers, which turns 10 this year and is a more obvious candidate for a reissue despite its vinyl-nerd erudition being out of style in electronic music's popoptimist spring. Those who will be drawn to the *October Language* reissue are the type who either desire as much of this kind of music as possible or already know and love this album—or who heard it way back when and yearned to hold it in their hands.