Jon Hassell: Dream Theory in Malaya: Fourth World Volume Two

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“He Loved Him Madly,” the swirling, eddying 32-minute piece that opens Miles Davis’s electric-era compendium *Get Up with It*, is a key but easily overlooked milestone in the history of ambient. It’s not the first ambient song; that game is as pointless as the endless “first rock song” debate. Brian Eno coined the term “ambient,” defined its rules, and shaped its sound. But Eno cites “He Loved Him Madly” as influential to *On Land*, the best of his original *Ambient* series, and it’s no doubt part of the reason he sought out Jon Hassell, a jazz trumpeter who fancied himself the heir to Davis and producer Teo Macero’s then-heretical experiments with samples and tape loops.

By the early ’80s, when Eno and Hassell made the *Fourth World* albums *Possible Music* and *Dream Theory in Malaya*, this kind of digital trickery was less blasphemous than befuddling. (It helped, of course, that Hassell didn’t have a classic body of work behind him.) The techniques used on these records—especially the latter, released in 1981 and freshly reissued this year—were adventurous for their time in their use of delay, pitch-shifting, esoteric sampling and looping. Hassell’s trumpet hardly sounds like one on *Malaya*; he uses it to generate an ambient buzz that ebbs and flows on his whim.

Opener “Chor Moiré” is jarring, a sort of manufactured fanfare with Hassell’s trumpet digitally clipped so it starts and stops in sharp bursts, like a skipping record. In a trick that would be imitated on countless ambient albums, from Gas’s *Pop* and *Königsforst* to Loscil’s *First Narrows*, “Courage” and “Dream Theory” are based around the same loop, slightly pitch-shifted, with different arrangements—the former minimal and pensive, the latter teeming with exotic life. The album’s most thrilling moment comes when a choir of birds surrounds the trumpet on track three, and the question of whether it’s a sample or just Hassell’s horn is part of why it’s so beguiling.

The boldest experiment is “Malay,” which loops a splashing water sample from an ethnographic recording of Malaysia’s Senoi people into a rhythmic element. The Senoi play a major role in the mythos of the album, which takes its name from a paper by a ’30s Mormon missionary on the Senoi culture of dream interpretation. There’s a queasy undertone of exoticism to Eno and Hassell’s “Fourth World” music, which Hassell describes as “a unified primitive/futuristic sound.” But at least Hassell seems less interested in evoking an Orientalist paradise so much as taking us inside an imagined Senoi mindset, where the world of dreams has a physical effect on reality.

The time couldn’t be riper to reissue *Dream Theory in Malaya*. This year has seen a few albums that take up the mantle of what it attempted: Arve Henriksen’s *Towards Language*, for instance, uses hushed trumpets to create a similar dreamlike space. Likewise, Mike Cooper’s astonishing *Raft* uses field recordings of water and manipulated instruments from around the world to drop us in a humid, slightly hostile wilderness. The “Fourth World” approach is well-represented today by artists on such labels as Leaving and International Feel that take their cues from the early, Eno-centric era of ambient and “world music” while slyly subverting its exoticism.

A lot of them do it better, and with more brains. Hassell very much buys into the idealized Western dream of the third world. Nowadays, artists like Cooper and CFCF deliberately scramble their “ethnic” cues to leave us adrift. The digital tricks utilized here might have been astonishing in their day but seem quaint now. But *Dream Theory in Malaya* still has the power to fascinate—and it’s a crucial snapshot of a time when the genre had already laid down
its roots and was just beginning to broaden its scope.

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