

White Ring: Gate of Grief

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The funny thing about the microgenres of the late 2000s and early 2010s is how many people seemed to hate them while buying into them. Perhaps because the internet as a facilitator of specific sounds was still a new idea, genres like chillwave and witch house tended to be dismissed offhand, including by the artists. But those sounds were real, people wouldn't shut up about them, and as happy as Neon Indian is that the term fell out of favor, put on *Psychic Chasms* and you're in summer 2009. That's not a bad thing.

Had White Ring's *Gate of Grief* come out in 2011 or 2012, the proper follow-up to their early singles and *Black Earth That Made Me* EP, those old discussions would rage around it. Is it witch house? Is it not witch house? In 2018, it's pretty fucking obvious that it is. In fact, this is about as close as we'll ever see to a meat-and-potatoes witch house album, a summation of the style's central elements and a reminder of why people liked the stuff in the first place, even while kidding themselves and the internet that they didn't.

Like their early music, epitomized by the scene-defining "Roses," this stuff is slow and gauzy, finding a meeting point between Southern rap at its most syrup-addled and the most ethereal developments in British post-punk. Thick layers of synth are treated like guitars. Trap drums

skitter behind layers of distortion, the 808 cymbals crashing like the gongs of doom. Vocals emanate faintly from the murk. The band's added a new member, Adina Viarengo; they praise her in the press materials for sounding like their other singer.

There are a few experiments, nothing that would've been too shocking seven years ago. In particular, some of these tracks actually sound like house ("witch house" is really a misnomer). "Close Yr Eyes" could be an artisan pop banger, maybe something by Carly Rae Jepsen, if the singer weren't shrouded in fog. "Lasts In" has some of the same shuddering bass distortions that define the recent work of Porter Ricks, though as these tracks were recorded over the course of a decade it's pointless to sniff out any influence.

There's also a feature from the Minneapolis artist FosterCare, who raps on "Low," though nothing he says is discernable. This brings to mind one of the common early criticisms of witch house: its decontextualization of rap. Though these discussions preceded cultural appropriation becoming a national discussion of debate, they seem a little silly now. With hillbilly nonentity Post Malone a megastar and guys like Yung Lean taking the piss out of rap as post-ironic meme fodder, what witch house does with rap seems totally innocuous.

Divorced from the online bullshit surrounding the music, *Gate of Grief* lets witch house stand totally free of context — as pure music—for perhaps the first time in its history. And it's good stuff. The thrills of this music remain: the cultish exclusivity, the sensation of being wrapped in barrow-down fog. And as rap-rock approaches something resembling perfection, it makes more sense now. Is it time for a nostalgic witch-house revival? I had enough flashbacks during this album to have an open mind.