

# Jake Muir: Lady's Mantle

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Jake Muir often mentions “surf rock” and a “beloved American pop group” in discussing his new album, *Lady's Mantle*. He's cagey about exactly what band he's talking about, but there's no mistaking the harmonies that bloom into view as “High Tide” begins, least of all the keening, heaven-searching voice at their center. Muir melts this band back into the sand and surf, confirming the existential fear of nature that courses through so much of their work. It brings to mind, at its best, Gavin Bryars' masterpiece *The Sinking of the Titanic* in its evocation of human voices haunting nature itself, an ephemeral flash of life living on in the impermeable fabric of the planet.

These samples are one part of the formula. The other is aqueous field recordings taken from the shores of California, Iceland and elsewhere. By virtue of an impossibly deep mix, they merge into one. We're reminded how water is so often described in the same terms as the voice—“murmuring,” “roaring,” “babbling.” At times it feels like the ocean samples are having a conversation with us; that haunted magic elevates *Lady's Mantle* above countless other

ambient records that seek to evoke nature. There's a heightened fairytale hyper-realism to this album; it's not just about the ocean but about the feeling of staring out at it and feeling something else, something alive, staring back.

As sumptuous as its stereo-hugging textures can be, long stretches of *Lady's Mantle* are dominated by ambient noise. There are parts where we feel like we're listening to healing-shop recordings of wave tapes and long for more instrumental engagement. But the sparseness instills a rugged feeling. The beach is always a bit uncomfortable, and here we can almost feel the sharp cold of surf against bare feet or the smarting of windblown sand against exposed skin. This music doesn't create an idealized fantasia of the beach the way some Café del Mar chill-out music might. Rather, it starts with the beach in its craggy glory and uses its distant samples to build a ghost story from there.

The samples are treated subtly, and a casual listener would be forgiven for not even noticing them. They're most obvious in the first minute of "High Tide," before they dissipate into the solemn lapping of water, and as a doo-wop swoon deep in "Yaupon." Elsewhere, it's harder to tell what's a sample and what's not. The organ that grumbles through "Green Eyes" could be cribbed from some old song, but it could just be Muir messing around on his own organ. Or it could be something he recorded outside. Muir's decision to obscure the samples so thoroughly speaks highly of his confidence. He could've made the source material a gimmick, but he leaves it a puzzle for listeners.

Given how pelagic this album is, it's curious that it should be named after lady's mantle, a kind of plant. But it's easy enough to imagine the ocean as a lady's mantle, a great cloth shrouding something greater and unseen beneath. A line from William Carlos Williams comes to mind: "The sea is circled and sways peacefully upon its plantlike stem." The album also recalls another quote, from a beloved American pop group: "*I'm a cork on the ocean/ Floating over a raging sea.*"