

Pick of the Day: 'Ship-Scope' by Shinichi Atobe (2001)

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Daniel Bromfield

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Shinichi Atobe's *Ship-Scope* EP lasts 18 minutes, but the expanses it opens are vast. It's a brief glimpse at something unutterably huge. Its smallness seems to mirror our own, as if telling us within the overwhelming size and mystery of the world, that our lives might as well be that short.

Every second counts, so *Ship-Scope* wastes no time deepening, expanding, teasing ideas to be developed later on. It opens in a whoosh of delay-treated pads as tiny chords flash deep in the mix like distant ship-lights at sea. This is "Ship-Scope," the title track.

“Plug and Delay” resembles techno, but it seems to emanate from somewhere else besides the sterling sound system of a DJ. It feels like it’s pushing to make itself known through an old radio that hasn’t been used for 60 years — or perhaps from the bottom of the ocean, or under sand.

A lot of fans wish “Rainstick” was longer. Expanded, fan-made edits exist on YouTube. But this isn’t really dance music. It’s worldbuilding, and I don’t think Atobe should have any obligation to take up space in the club. “Rainstick” is a place you pass through, then you leave.

Either way it’s less of a piece with “Plug and Delay” than “The Red Line,” which concludes with a brief snippet of another track that seems to have swum its way onto the record and lingered for a bit before vanishing back into the murk. It’s one of those moments, like the lonesome train at the end of Pet Sounds and the backward voices at the end of its cousin Sgt. Pepper, that suggest the record has broken free of the firmament of music into something inter-dimensional.

“The Red Line” occupies nearly half of the album, submerging to impossible depths during its runtime, its drums barely audible even as the track occupies the traditional role of the long-form disco epic. It’s minimal techno at its most austere — pretty much all pads and drums, except for a flutter similar to the chords on “Ship-Scope” that appears toward the end. In its depth and unyielding flatness it resembles the sea. By the time the drums drop out we’re adrift.

Shinichi Atobe is a Japanese producer who recorded this EP for the legendary turn-of-the-millennium German label Chain Reaction before vanishing. Chain Reaction’s music always felt egoless; a lot of its artists’ music sounded more or less the same with minor differences, all of it descending from the work of label founders Basic Channel. Many Chain Reaction CDs were originally packaged in metal canisters, as if to suggest they were dredged up from a shipwreck.

Atobe epitomizes this mystery. Only one photo of him exists. He rarely DJs. His debut album, *Butterfly Effect*, came out in 2014 and consists mostly of archival material; all his subsequent releases are likewise sourced from old dubplates. But this isn’t the chic anonymity of someone like Burial. It seems like a genuine attempt by the auteur to distance himself from his music — to make it feel like it wasn’t made but found, salvaged, stumbled across at the bottom of the sea.

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