

Loscil: Submers

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Loscil's 2002 album *Submers* is inspired by submarines, but it doesn't put us inside them but outside, where the pressure is great and the shapes making their way through the murk could be anything. In real life, we'd drown or be crushed by the unrelenting pressure or both, but we swim through these oceans the same way a cartoon character can walk on a cloud. Just like a good deep-sea documentary, *Submers* offers us an impossible view from the safety of home.

Scott Morgan's ambient project would take on a more personal dimension on the subsequent *First Narrows*, which kicked off an astonishing run of albums inspired by the producer's native Vancouver. *Submers*, by contrast, is a flight of fancy. It's a natural progression from his debut *Triple Point*, which was inspired by the laws of thermodynamics, but while few of us have much of a reference for how heat behaves, the deep sea occupies a spot in most of our imaginations. *Submers* inflames our latent fantasies of sunless oceans and bug-eyed beasts.

The overwhelming fact of *Submers*' sound is a thick, low-end soup, through which luminous house chords, vivid sonar pings and pinprick microhouse drums make their ways. Many tracks on *Submers* ("Diable Marin," "Resurgam," "Triton") are major-key, which is counterintuitive for music that aims to evoke mystery, but these nine tracks are anything but reassuring. Most of the sounds we hear seem to come from miles away, appropriate given how well sound travels underwater, and the impression we're left with is chiefly of emptiness, lifelessness and hostility.

Submers might sound like a frightening experience, but it's as neutral as nature itself. In fact, it's surprisingly easy to throw on. Its midrange tones exist in that golden spot where it feels like the music itself is massaging us. Even "Kursk," named for a sunken Russian sub, is eerie and still, evoking the vessel's moldering wreck rather than the panic of its sinking. Morgan's use of the entire stereo field means the music doesn't just hover obstinately but seems to surround us. *Submers* is easy enough to fall asleep to, but don't be surprised if you feel like you're sinking.

16 years after its release, *Submers* is being issued on vinyl for the first time to commemorate the 25th anniversary of its label, Kranky, one of the best ambient labels of all time. Compared to some of the albums Morgan would make after it, *Submers* sounds a bit dated; it's very much

a product of the microhouse turn-of-the-millennium, when pointillist percussion and clipped chords were the easiest route to critical acclaim. Meanwhile, *First Narrows* and its ilk are a little less tethered to such a specific genre and era and thus hold up a little better in 2018.

But while plenty of albumssound like *Submers*, none offer quite the same experience. The ocean is a common source of inspiration in ambient music, but artists tend to conjure either its vastness (the dub techno albums on the Chain Reaction label, an early forebear to this sound) or playful Saint-Saëns fantasies of dancing dolphins and coral reefs (Jürgen Müller's *Science of the Sea*, Suzanne Ciani's *Seven Waves*). The impression *Submers* leaves us with is of sheer volume. The pressure could crush us, but we swim freely beneath the waves, weightless.