

Nivhek: After Its Own Death/Walking in a Spiral Towards the House

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After Its Own Death/Walking in a Spiral Towards the House is Liz Harris' first album as Nivhek, a curious name that's just a hair away from Nivek, i.e. Skinny Puppy's Nivek Ogre. That's Kevin backwards: Kehvin? Maybe it's a '90s baby reference or perhaps the Grouper auteur understands female musicians who don't sing are almost inevitably misgendered and wants to play with that ambiguity. For those who like her music for its smeared, ethereal layers of voice, this double album forces us to reconsider what draws us to her art.

The album opens on layers of Liz's voice, but soon it yields to what sounds like a mercilessly whacked note on a dusty Rhodes: the baby version of a Sunn O))) drone. It's a gnarlier and more aggressive spin on the tried-and-true Grouper formula, and one with more momentum. Harris' pieces typically hang in thin air. This one moves, and in a few minutes we're excited about what comes next.

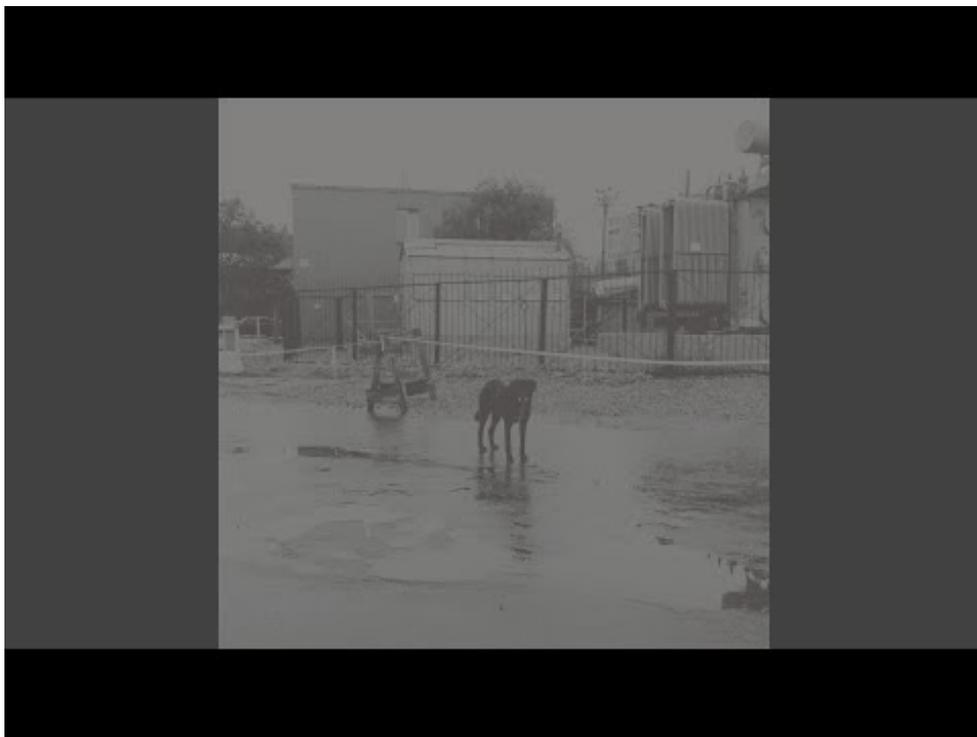
There's a brilliant section with pendulous vibraphone and plucks of echoing guitar that should sate anyone's withdrawals following the breakup of the great '90s post-rock band

Labradford. Then comes a blast of violent power-ambient guitar that makes the opening Rhodes rumination sound puny. Every now and again her voice pops in, as if to comment on the action.

Then, as “After Its Own Death (Side 2)” winds its way towards its conclusion, the entire sound palate yields to unadorned vibraphone, its long sustain ringing through what sounds like a vast, churchy space. The vibraphone is a terrifically pure sound that conjures a whiff of ‘50s space-age pseudo-sophistication; some of the best-ever ambient tracks—Oval’s “Do While,” Loscil’s “Charlie”—abuse it half to death. But after the odyssey of the album’s first 30 minutes, it’s a tremendous letdown to find out the latter 30 minutes are *just* the one instrument.

Maybe the album would be less of a letdown if disc two were just vibraphone and all the interesting stuff happened on disc one, but the vibraphone starts about eight minutes from the end of disc one and never lets up or takes any quirky left turns. Disc two should start with the first pendulous, rung-out vibraphone note. It might seem absurd for something as arbitrary as the divisions between tracks to define the quality of the music, but the promise of a “double album” promises a lush sprawl full of ideas, and this doesn’t feel like two albums but half of a good one.

The album works best, maybe, as a sleep aid, and the way its sonic palate gradually gets sparser and dries up is reminiscent of Robert Rich’s seven-hour sleep-aid *Somnium*. But a focused listen is a recipe for disappointment. Ambient’s supposed to be both interesting and ignorable. This album is the former in its first half, the latter in its second, both less often than we’d like.



<https://youtu.be/22asVa3TfFA>

