

The Notwist
The Devil, You + Me
(City Slang, 2008)

Oxford literary don (and the man who unintentionally spawned *Cats* the musical) T.S. Eliot was intrigued by one experience of Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic explorers: the phantom companion, the feeling that there was always another one of their group who eluded each head count. At one point in Eliot's *The Wasteland*, the narrator asks, "Who is the third who always walks beside you?" "Umm", answers the Notwist's Markus Acher in a an even, laconic drawl, 'that's the Devil.'

On *The Devil, You + Me*, the Notwist's first full length album since the pervasive success of 2002's *Neon Golden*, this haunted, desolate Antarctic landscape works as a backdrop for the album's eleven snapshots of everyday alienation and understated existential crises. The poignant resignation of Acher's voice in his quiet criticisms of bourgeois habits hasn't changed, neither really has the music: intricate, lush, layered, and a pointed drabness. The Notwist have always been an interesting personal barometer of sorts; with their self titled debut in 1991 they were screaming along to chunky hardcore while I was learning my first power chords imitating Nirvana. By 1998, myself and *Shrink* had let the BPM slow down a little, and let a little jazz and electronica slip into our lives, if only in a kind of superficial way. By *Neon Golden*, we were both more open for the playful, sparse arrangements and repetitions.

Since then, however, it seems that among the gazillion similarly-tuned side projects the band's jazzier moments have been evicted to Acher's Tied and Tckled Trio, and the more upbeat electronic production only in band member Console's remixes. *The Devil, You + Me* is complexly woven, continuing the band's sensitive use of a wide range of instrumentation, with 'Gloomy Planets' and 'Boneless' providing escalating highlights. But the album is left feeling somehow staid and a bit too familiar for a band who you know is more experimental and unsettling than that. When Acher chants, "There's no escaping from this circling place," you can't help but think of his words from the earlier album, "we will never, will never leave this room," a feeling reinforced when both share a remarkably similar-sounding bridge. Perhaps, as with the pounding inevitability of the opening number 'Good Lies', the music illustrates their subject matter a bit too well, instigating rather than arousing from a middle class stupor. *The Devil, You + Me* is worthwhile—a haunting, insistent return—but underwhelming; here's hoping the songs Lali Puna are currently working on take us further afield.

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