

Autistic Daughters

Jealousy and Diamond
Kranky
2004
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If the name Autistic Daughters is unfamiliar, its personnel—Dean Roberts on guitars and vocals, bassist Werner Dafeldecker (Polwechsel), and drummer Martin Brandlmayr (Trapist and Radian)—certainly isn't. *Jealousy and Diamond* finds Roberts continuing his movement away from the abstract electronics of *All Cracked Medias* to a greater emphasis on vocal-based song structures which emerged with the 2000 Ritornell release *And the Black Moths Play the Grand Cinema* (newly reissued on Staubgold) and carried on with last year's *Be Mine Tonight*. Even though Autistic Daughters presents a collective vision, Roberts is the natural focal point, given his dominant guitar and vocals, yet it's hardly a solo work as his colleagues shape the sound in key ways. That's not surprising, given that the album was created by live performance; the trio laid down basic tracks in April 2003 at Amann studios in Vienna, and Roberts recorded more voices, guitars and miscellaneous instruments with Valerie Tricoli in Italy in the fall of 2003.

Certainly the live feel is evident immediately. The opening song, "A Boxful of Birds", oozes ambiance, the music slowly emerging like some awakening organism, Roberts' hushed singing heard amidst electric guitar and tom toms. A radical shift occurs midway through when the music explodes into dissonant, acerbic clatter of breathless vocal yells, guitar scrapings, and percussive bangings. There's a definite song structure but it's presented loosely enough to allow for unpredictable and spontaneous moments. The group favours timeless, funereal dirges rooted in blues and folk traditions, with a curdling, slow-to-medium tempo dominating most songs; admittedly the creeping pace is somewhat wearying by the time the last song arrives. A late-night ambiance of portent and dread permeates the music, deepened by the combustible dimension of the band's playing, a tense containment that threatens to explode at any moment. Naturally, Roberts' fragile, quavering voice adds to the unease, as there's a constant undercurrent of desperation, even controlled hysteria, to his music that perpetually simmers below the surface. His distorted vocal and raw guitar stabs give the hard-edged "Spend it on the Enemy (While it was Raining)," for instance, a hallucinatory quality.

At eleven minutes, "Florence Crown, Last Relay" offers the best example of the band's live approach as the trio, led by Dafeldecker's quiet contrabass and Roberts' quivering, ghostly vocal, unhurriedly and organically nurtures the song's development throughout. Ray Davies' "Rainy Day in June" is an inspired cover choice, though the song's incantatory, dirge feel hardly recalls The Kinks. While the trio's elastic treatment of tempo is generally well-handled throughout, here's the rare instance where percussion tempo variations prove distracting. Finally, in contrast to the overall dark mood, Roberts' harmonium on the title track ends the album with some modestly stirring uplift.

While *Jealousy and Diamond* is uncompromising music that makes little concession to commerciality or accessibility, fans of Roberts' previous work should find this latest chapter a satisfying developmental step. Rather than his work becoming increasingly hermetic, Dafeldecker and Brandlmayr help expand the vistas of Roberts' music and breathe into it a palpable sense of spontaneity.



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