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Portishead's Dummy (33 1/3)



Synopsis

An album which distilled a genre from the musical, cultural, and social ether, Portishead's *Dummy* was such a complete artistic achievement that its ubiquitous successes threatened to exhaust its own potential. RJ Wheaton offers an impressionistic investigation of *Dummy* that imitates the cumulative structure of the album itself, piecing together interviews, impressions of time and place, cultural criticism, and a thorough exploration of the music itself. The approach focuses as much on the reception and response that *Dummy* engendered as it does on the original production of the album. How is that so many people have, collectively, made a quintessential headphone album into a nightclub album? How have they made the product of a niche local scene into an international success? This is the story of how an innovative, experimental album became the iconic sound for the better part of a decade; and an aesthetic template for the experience of music in the digital age.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is probably the single strongest book of the 7 or 8 I've read in the 33 1/3 series. Wheaton strikes an excellent balance between smart, wide-ranging formal analysis and open praise. His attempts to tease apart the individual sounds that go into making the dense, dark, beautiful world of Portishead's music made me rush back to listen to each track of *Dummy* over and over again, and marvel at just how remarkable their work is. But what is even more impressive is how he successfully shows the resonances between Portishead's music and broader trends in

musical/cultural history. The way he hints at the remarkable, tangled web of connections; of technologies, people and geography, which operate both above and beneath our basic daily awareness and how much of Portishead's music does the same. The writing in this book is sharp, engaging and weirdly ominous. Kind of like 'Wandering Star.' I sincerely hope Wheaton writes more books in the future. The 33 1/3 series would be better as a whole if more people had Mr. Wheaton's wide ranging curiosity.

I've read quite a few of the 33-1/3 series, and I think this is one of the best entries. It gives a great insight into the making of the album and also positions its creation within the greater musical trends of the time. My one disappointment is that the book presupposes the instance of a single "Bristol Scene" that existed around the time of this album; but the city is also important as home of two other scenes -- that of iconic indie label Sarah Records, and the more experimental sounds of the loose collective of musicians that included Flying Saucer Attack, The Third Eye Foundation, Crescent, Amp, Movietone, and others.

I'm a huge fan of the 33 1/3 series. True, some are hits, some are misses. RJ Wheaton's exegesis on Portishead's Dummy is absolutely in the former camp. Wheaton artfully weaves background on the album's composition and production with biographical information, all the while making a point to put the album into context - of the times, of its peers, of its genre, of its influences and impact. The best entries in the 33 1/3 series do two things. First, they make you want to listen to nothing but the album under review for at least a week. Second, they elicit a new appreciation for the album, regardless of how well you know it, or how long you've been a fan. Wheaton's take on Dummy accomplishes both.

Wheaton dissects the work of Portishead with the critical eye of eye of a micro-surgeon. No detail, musical nuance is missed and it makes going back to the music so much more enjoyable. Be prepared to have a tablet or laptop handy to follow the many musical references he mentions along the way (it would be great if this were easier from within the Kindle version itself).

Not only that, but twice as long as some! It can be a bit starry-eyed and ponderous from time to time, but the greatest praise I can give it is this: I found Dummy to be my least-favourite Portishead record (so sue me, I just love the other two more). This made me reconsider and see Dummy with new eyes. I'd recommend it if it's your first entry in the series, but it may also set the bar too high -

especially when crap like the Fear of Music book found their way into the series.

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