

I REVIEW – Alex’s Hand: ‘Madame Psychosis’ EP, 2012 (“art-rockers deliberately braining themselves with a tin tray”)



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Alex’s Hand: ‘Madame Psychosis’ EP

As they totter and lurch through the four songs on their debut EP, Alex’s Hand are almost pure Halloween. It’s not just their affinity for macabre subjects, but their larger-than-life, cartoonish demeanour. They don’t just bring weird to the table – they slap it down on top, like an oversized pair of dirty boots, and then stare you out until you say something about it.

Underneath their gurning and silly pseudonyms there’s some fine musicianship – you’d expect no less from Seattle art-rockers who revere Zappa, The Melvins and The Residents. Yet the band’s prime fuel is atavistic spasms of prehistoric zombie jazz; trainwreck rock-and-roll; jarring *faux-boondocks* punk. They sound like a wrecked stovepipe hat, or an outgrown tuxedo with the elbows worn shiny: or like a quick rimshot played off the jutting, grimy wrist of a backwoods murderer. The tensions between their darkness, their outright goonery and their twists of clever, carny campery give them their particular flavour. Often, Alex’s Hand come across like a leering, anarchic ‘Muppet Show’ parody of Nick Cave: telling tales of blood and chaos, crawling on all fours, but winking hard as they do so.

Laura
Alex's Hand

00:00 |  03:15

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As the band roll their parodic, chaotic, travelling-show style along, geek bones sometimes gleam through. On *Laura* (a spooky, corny ‘Twin Peaks’ tribute) they jog and jerk through a whistle-stop tour of the show’s soap-noir tropes (“*stop-light flashing on and off – / there’s a darkness in the woods!*” / *A town with so many secrets – / what lies beyond?*”). A double-jointed ‘South Park’ scratchalong full of silly voices and 1950s slapback, it chuck’s the lush narcotic memories of Angelo Badalamenti’s soundtracking unceremoniously out of the side door in favour of a more pointed strangeness. Feedback scrunches around the drum-clatter. Horn-playing guitarist Slurrrp blurts out wrecked soul riffs with mottled old bloodstains dried onto the edges. Meanwhile, frontman Doctor Shark stumbles through the song like a disturbed conscience. When he isn’t looning along with the melodrama he’s pulling curtains off the rail, moaning with a barely-tranquillized despair as the tune plays tug-of-war between rock’n’roll perkiness and a wandering moping tonality (all lynchpinned by Slurrrp’s startling, randomised guitar solo).

Robot

Alex's Hand

00:00 |  02:33

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Similarly, the two-and-a-half crash-punk minutes of *Robot* ply a drunken line between cartwheel, pratfall and purposeful brain damage. Trapped in a tiny shack, the band charge their foreshortened Jesus Lizard riffs back and forth like sore-headed bears. Smacking into walls and roaring out resentful scatterbrained lyrics, they never get further than a ball of confusion. Eventually they crouch and sulk in the middle, smouldering like a burning trashcan and emitting a bastardized King Crimson growl of muttering bass and smeared, squealing guitar.

On the surface this is awkward lunkheadery, but the frustration and dismay is deliberate, self-inflicted – and clearly staged. Imagine an art-rock trio deliberately braining themselves with a tin tray to keep their audience happy. Whether this is all about avoiding straightforward expressiveness or whether Alex’s Hand are on some kind of *echt*-Brecht trip... that’s less clear. The theatricality certainly allows them to skim some pretty sordid areas, while hiding their sharper songwriting brains in their shoes.

Stalker

Alex's Hand

00:00 |  03:57

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With *Stalker*, Shark and co. rewrite a ugly tale of abduction and sex-murder as a lachrymose tragedy... but from the murderer’s corner. Drummer Tub skitters away on skeleton percussion; a campfire guitar limps through the chords. While his bass yawps away like cardboard thunder on a travelling-show wagon, Shark blurts out his words like a strangulated Nick Cave. The melody is sweet, lovelorn and memorable, but the jet-black humour is borderline repulsive – “*stabbed alone in a room / Crying out, no-one hears you. / You look so lost and afeared – / to him, it’s been a really good year.*” Yet a sombre, Lynchian aura of romance hangs over the song. During that moment before the horrible twist, everything seems so much more vivid and alive. “*Exit the car,*

but you look back / and see those trees in the cul-de-sac, / and feel safe on those tracks – / but love has come for you... ” The song doesn’t survive its own story either. Disturbing scraping noises and a brief twisted guest guitar solo (from Step Daddy’s Ben Reece) build to a sudden crushing derailment as the dream of love and death violently collapses.

Reception

Alex's Hand

00:00 |  04:03

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Jaunty and gloomy, Reception picks over homelier horrors – a mire of despondency and addictions – but with Steve Barnes’s beautiful ripples of piano and organ soothing the murk, it’s also the band’s finest hour. With its spectrally pulsing bass and its nighthawk atmosphere, the song comes across like a wrecked and blasted take on Morphine. “*Hauling yourself from the reception, / blame it all on depression,*” moans Shark, still mooching around mournfully in a shabby coat with his hair in a Robert Smith tousle, clutching a suspicious bottle. “*Carted off and then forgotten. / The others refuse that we have a problem. / Drink up – / drugs, self medicate.../ small twist of fate.*” A superbly mock-melodramatic, fall-down-drunk guitar solo follows, as if someone had slurred out its name. This is one of those songs that realise that defeat doesn’t usually just drop to rock-bottom and fizz out, but bumps along on a plateau halfway there, fuelled mostly by bathos. “*Like a snail trying to build a home, / the roots don’t last and they end up all alone...*” There’s more to Alex’s Hand than big boots, geek jokes and horseLaughs.

Alex's Hand: ‘Madame Psychosis’ EP

Alex's Hand (self-released), (no catalogue number)

CD/download EP

Released: 1st October 2012

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