



## **CLOUDDEAD – Cloudead (Big Dada)**

If you visit your local music emporium and ask to be pointed towards the works of Cincinnati sound sculptors Cloudead, you would be directed to the hip hop section. By virtue of the facts that there are certain requisite hip hop elements present in Cloudead's 'music' and that *Cloudead*, the album, appears on the excellent Big Dada label – responsible for key releases of the genre in those from Roots Manuva and Ty – then I guess this categorization is natural. I acknowledge this, but in Cloudead, we are dealing with an act so unique that tags become irrelevant.

A very good reference point would be The Beta Band. Though musically poles apart, it is the genius possessed by both to meld just about everything brilliant they've ever heard into one breathtaking whole of their own, that bind the two.

If you have not the slightest hip hop leanings, but appreciate the experimental, then I ask you to trust me on this one. *Cloudead* gathers together six 10" EP's, recorded and released between 1998 and last year. Each EP came with the minimum of information; both sides were titled the same (and oddly, such as *I Promise Never To Get Paint On My Glasses Again*), and were housed in generic packaging of simple washes of colour. So, bearing in mind that this is a chronologically sequenced compilation, it is all the more extraordinary that it holds together as the mind-blowing psychedelic masterpiece that it is.

Created from "Dr. Sample, Tascam tape 8-track, Radio Shack mic, people's old instruments, records, English," this is most definitely pushing 'conventional' song structure into hitherto unexplored galaxies.

As much as I love the band, Radiohead is Old Skool in the company of Cloudead. When my flatmate and I aired this at home for the first time, we kept looking at each in stony-faced disbelief, laughing hysterically, swearing occasionally, questioning the sanity of the protagonists, or reigning in possible influences.

A hundred names bounced around: Vangelis, Frank Zappa, Last Poets, Mercury Rev, Swans, Tangerine Dream, The Fugs, Cypress Hill, Stravinsky, Kid 606, Beck, Faust... the list went on and on.

Massive waves of stormy or grandiose orchestral ambience dominate, but there are cut-ups; cavernous, plodding beats, inspired and deranged samples, all weaving an *enormous*, terrifying sonic tapestry.

It's harrowing and hugely uplifting by turns, and although tempo and mood change without warning, it flows like lager on New Year's Eve. 'Rapping' is not always what the vocal delivery could be termed: there is the odd hail of machine-gun chatter, but more often than not, it is bombed-out and of a galaxy, far, far away.

(I am not for one second going to suggest that Cloudead indulge in any manner of illicit herbal or chemical shenanigans, but it's hard to believe that this music is of this

reality or dimension. If they do, then that's their prerogative. Like it or not, it's a fact that much of the greatest music ever recorded was shaped by sackfuls of strangeness; I just hope that these explorers keep focused on the map.)

The production too, is of *elsewhere*. Much of the album is bathed in fuzz, crackle and distortion, and the vocals appear at just about every level in the mix, from a whisper to cutting and harsh. It's completely mad, utterly out-there and extremely progressive even of the fascinating abstract hip hop realm in which they dwell.

Finally, the lyrics: Poetic and wordy, there is much to plough through in the accompanying booklet, and it's all but impossible to follow when listening. It would be cruel to give too much away, but rest assured that Odd Nosdam, Dose One and Why? (who named thus, must be a riot to converse with) are creatures of high intelligence, imagination and social conscience. Try this: *The fat man's drenched hat / crumpled in a shivering fist / He's lost the whole house from around him / every single shingle shattered into atoms / only he remains / standing circumcised on torn earth / where his living room once was / stripped to his skin / with a wet hat in his right hand.* That's from *Bike (1)*, and is typical of the depth of Clouddead. They are randomly as lucid and moving as this, or bouncing gleefully around in padded cell vocabulary, roughly stitching together streams of disturbing language.

But as I said, this is bright stuff, and if you look carefully, a major underlying theme is how, despite all our species knows, we continue to wantonly tear our planet, and each other, to pieces.

And Clouddead seem fully aware that they are making huge strides: *Are you scared the album will end before the doorbell rings / and you'll be left to greet your guests with a tied tongue?* they enquire on unhinged closer *Bike (2)*. Cheeky and a tad self-congratulatory maybe, but they have gauged the average reaction well. The last three words uttered here are *'isn't it remarkable'*. Indeed it is, and thus far, hands-down, er, compilation album of the year.

**TOM SHERIFF**

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