

## Mp3 Alan Sparhawk - Solo Guitar



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The sound flows out of the speakers like honey from an over-filled apiary. The guitar sounding like both the reverberation of the engines of the freightliner about to tear your body in two the screams of warning from the beach." 9 MP3 Songs ELECTRONIC: Ambient, ROCK: Psychedelic Details: Its exactly as the title says Sparhawk of Low playing guitar. Simple, right? And amazing his guitar burns through the air, sometimes creating waves built of empty space and sometimes searing like Eddie Van Halens (an allusion made concrete through his cover of Eruption). Dave Heaton, The Big Takeover More guitar music comes from Alan Sparhawk of Low who on his album length solo debut Solo Guitar (Silber Records) blends glacially moving and somewhat minimalistic guitarscapes with strands of glistening noise. Quite often the tracks tend to start on a slow and intimate note before moving right into a tsunami of feedback, a wall of breathtaking dissonance. All in all its enough to transport one to the farthest reaches of the galaxy and back again in a matter of minutes. Mats Gustafson, The Broken Face Low's guitarist Alan Sparhawk finally decided to release a full-length. The thing is I was in for a pleasant shock when I first heard this record. This isn't a record of someone who's been in a rock band for the last fifteen years or so. The guy has made a conscious decision to break off from the past and start from scratch. Literally, what he's doing with this record is reinventing himself. Sounds this man comes up with are more reminiscent to sustained glory of Loren Connors than anything else. Long passages [two pieces clock in at the 13 and 18 minute marks] of blissful, drawn-out notes make for a listen that is as challenging as it is rewarding. To be fair, there's a lot more to Sparhawk's mastery than just long sustained notes. I hear references to Fahey's back-country blues in places as well as a more ambient version of the long-gone British trio Loop [though, admittedly, he's much more relaxed than anyone from Robert Hampson ever was on the guitar]. "How a Freighter Comes into the Harbor" softly establishes an eerie atmosphere that is full of elongated notes

that beautifully drift on and on and on without a visible end, only near the end to be interrupted by a scraping sound resembling a freighter train's wheels scraping against rusty rails. What a beautifully descriptive sound this is. Like a perfect illustration in the dustbins of your mind, the sounds held here bring forth the pictures you forgot in the first place. As with all good things in life, unfortunate thing is "Solo Guitar" comes to an end before its potential is completely realized. Tom Sekowski, Gaz-Eta On the day the newspaper tells me Gyorgi Ligeti is dead, I see him referenced in the press message for the CD by Alan Sparhawk. It made me think to play Ligeti again. Just a wild guess: I don't think that any other solo instrument got more CDs than the guitar. It's just a guess. The press blurb says its 'in the vein of underground stars like Aarktica Reynolds as well as guitar heroes like Eddie van Halen (incidentally hailing from the very same town as Vital Weekly). Alan Sparhawk, of Low fame (to some, not here, ever since I heard their cover of Joy Division's 'Transmission'), plays guitar in an improvised manner and adds a high dose of reverb to the sound, 'allowing a greater immediacy'. But the reverb is used simply too much, making it very high end like, and creating an artificial depth, rather than a bass depth. I must say the reverb builds to large walls of sound, but it also ruins the music, which could have perhaps been 'warm' and 'intimate', if the choice of sound effects would have been more delicate. Van Halen returns in 'Eruption by Eddie van Halen', but instead of the original super fast, Sparhawk slows it down, letting each note die out, before turning an engine on. A bit like Low did to 'Transmission'. Next time a real solo guitar, please, and not a duet of reverb and guitar. Frans deWard, Vital Weekly Its unfortunate that Alan Sparhawk chose to give his first album apart from Low such a bland title. Calling it Solo Guitar makes it seem like an exercise, a frivolous release of aimless noodling with the focus on the player and instrument rather than on the music. In reality, its a frightfully powerful experience, with Sparhawk caressing and torturing his instrument to produce a fantastic collection of minimalist guitar that unfolds like a terse yet evocative short story. Eschewing any kind of recognizable structure, Sparhawk indulges in elemental fragments of sound with long, droning expanses interspersed with frantic, thrashing fits of colic and foreboding silences that contain an unsettling emptiness, like the quiet drawing back of water that precedes a destructive and crushing wave. In only a minute and a half, How the Weather Comes over the Hillside, simmers quietly and emblazons Sparhawk's intentions firmly and distinctly upon the stark canvas of silence. Sagrado Corazon de Jesu leaves behind the brevity of the first track, with a persistent drone establishing a fertile bed, out of which well-spaced squalls emerge like lightning-flashes, burning and

blazing for nanoseconds and leaving their afterglow hanging in the senses long after they've dissipated. It's a physical experience as much as an aural one. The low-frequency tones are felt in the bones long before they rattle the eardrums. These sounds aren't simply being played or coaxed from Sparhawk's instrument; they're being wrenched free as if through struggle. *Sagrado*, along with a heavily deconstructed and disassembled cover of Van Halen's *Eruption* are the only digressions from the larger theme of the album. That theme, of a battered and bruised freighter skimming across dark and endless seas toward safe harbor only to be torn asunder by pursuing storms, only explicitly exists in the extended song titles. Despite the obscure framing, those songs, anchored by the seventeen-minute *How a Freighter Comes into the Harbor*, are a remarkable triumph of suggestive storytelling and highlights the potential that minimalist composition can have in the hands of cautious and attentive composers. While Kawabata Makoto's 2002 experiments with the *Tsurubami* and *Rebels Powers* charted similar territory but seemed to pointlessly spin their wheels, Sparhawk realizes the importance of firm control over his output. Like fellow minimalists *1 Mile North* (who also explore the austerity of a harbor on the magnificent *Conduction Convection Radiation* collaboration with *The Wind-Up Bird and Colophon*), the music on *Solo Guitar* is imbued with narrative subtext and informed by thoughtful plotting that gives it more impact than any lyrical treatment possibly could. *Solo Guitar* is challenging and requires that listeners surrender their expectations, allowing themselves to be completely submerged. While some may find it uncomfortable at first, the level of development at work on this album is a thrilling treat, and such fine musical and artistic experiences are not to be ignored or avoided. Michael Patrick Brady, *Stylus* This is one of the more interesting things I've yet heard from the always interesting Silber Records label. Alan is best known for his work as an integral part of Duluth-based slowcore pioneers *Low*, and for his more recent rockier sounds with the *Black-Eyed Snakes*. This ranges from gently subtle ambience, to gracefully evocative *Popol Vuh*-like mystic atmospherics, and loud scorching pyrotechnic lava flows. There are nine tracks; the longest is almost eighteen minutes, the shortest, just under a minute. It feels like Sparhawk is enjoying the unlimited landscape of possibilities presented by these solo guitar instrumentals. He continually shifts his approach to playing, a couple tracks recall Tom Verlaine's instrumental work, elsewhere it's more like Tom Carter, but it's far more wide-ranging than any easy comparisons would allow. *Dream Magazine* The basic name of this disc is deceiving. While it does accurately describe the activity on the disc, it fails to capture the complex and spacious sounds produced by the solo guitar of Alan

Sparhawk. For those not in the know Sparhawk is also a member of the aptly named band Low. While some of these tracks are minimal, many have a harsher edge to them. The guitar work inhabits the middle ground between Loren MazzaCane Connors harshest work and Kieji Hanios most plaintive. The music is made with a solo guitar with the aid of looping pedals and delays that build up to complex and dense sounds. On Sargrado Corazn de Jes, the guitar is at first plucked. Then, the strings or body of the guitar is rubbed to make a barely audible hum. Over that more aggressive and distorted guitar lines are added. Following that, there is a loop of the guitar slowly being strummed, while more dissonant and desperate guitar lines explode out of the amplifier into what sounds like a cavernous hall. The track ends with gentle waves of feedback rippling across the surface before it ends abruptly at the 13 and a half minute mark with a hum that slowly fades out. Alan proves, despite the dour sound of most of the record, that he does not totally lack a sense of humor. One example can be found in the title of the short piece Eruption by Eddie Van Halen. It starts out with some morosely bent notes before the aforementioned Eddie Van Halen eruption. If the song was not called, Eruption by Eddie Van Halen the explosion of quick guitar licks might come as a surprise. How it ends closes the album. It is short--just a couple of repeated guitar lines. The song concludes before it can be resolved into anything. The abruptness of the ending leaves the listener wanting more. Dan Cohoon, Amplitude Equals One Over Frequency Squared Alan Sparhawk, guitar aficionado and slow-core genius, has released his own full-length solo disc. This disc is nothing like what I have heard him do before. Unlike his other projects, Black-Eyed Snakes or Retribution Gospel Choir, this album is stripped down, only guitar work. Even more minimalistic than Low, Sparhawk uses noise and crafts drones through his guitar and nothing else. There is no percussion of any sort. There is only the guitar, some loops, and spontaneous composition. How the Weather Comes Over the Central Hillside begins the disc and briefly introduces what is to come. The guitars ebb and flow through the speakers, creating a thunderous drone that waves and undulates. This brief track leads one into an even briefer track, Sagrado Corazon De Jesu (First Attempt). This appx one minute track gives a brief melody and displays some of the beautiful reverb that will be used on later tracks. Ethereal and dreamy, this track is just right and beautiful. Its follow up, Sagrado Corazon De Jesu (Second Attempt) clocks in at 13:26. It begins with low volume and Sparhawk's signature guitar sound that rings through the speakers. Patient and careful, the guitar comes in and fades to quiet. A very low small rumble sits down in the mix as the guitar pops and blurts. A Spanish twinge comes through the guitar line that devolves into fuzzy

walls of sound. The guitar layers sparkle and Sparhawk dots the landscape with crying guitar lines that weep and cry out. The volume slowly builds as the guitars roar and the river of drone becomes more of a torrent. The volume and drone eventually level out and the pulse begins to repeat over and over. Its almost soothing; yet, there is some angst in there as well. Its certainly a gorgeous layered affect that entrances the listener and brings them into Sparhawk's dreamy world. How a Freighter Comes into the Harbor begins with what sounds like a fog horn. The guitar rings and then goes quiet. Silence is certainly not an issue for Sparhawk. He does not shy away from what many Americans are uncomfortable with. He then adds a tempo with what sounds like tapping of a guitar. Notes are played over this ticking drone and the low level of the volume just makes it serene at this point. A feedback type ring cuts through the quiet as a low hum punctuates the landscape and metallic sounds lay underneath. As this 17 minute track progresses, wind sounds move through the ambience and the volume continues to rise at a slow, steady pace. A low guitar line interrupts the drones with dissonance and volume, perhaps signaling frustration in the midst of contemplation. The mood becomes spacey as the layers begin to mesh and meld together. Grinding metallic sounds eventually piece the hypnotic drone and create a very irritating sound, pulling the listener out of their hypnotic state. Exploding sounds sit under the metallic sounds as Sparkhawk bangs on his guitar. This devolves into sound and noise that is chaotic and explosive. How the Weather Hits the Freighter has swirling repetitive guitars that are high in volume and fuzz out into drone heaven. I gather that this depicts the relentless weather hitting a boat as it pulls into a tumultuous harbor. This transitions into In the Harbor. With the boat safe home, Sparhawk plays a very brief lumbering piece. Perhaps the size of the vessel insists on its slow, lumbering pace. How the Engine Room Sounds is a ruckus, as one would expect. The sounds of the guitar mimic the pistons of the engine as higher pitch noises dot the landscape, perhaps mimicking the engineers cries to one another. The hum from the amp and feedback fill a quiet moment in the composition. Silence once again comes up in the mix and the engine begins again, but at a much quieter level. Eruption by Eddie Van Halen, begins with a simple, quiet guitar line fading in and out of the silence. Eventually silence, then the Sparhawk starts to rip Van Halen style. Of course, his style is dirtier than Eddies. Lastly, How it Ends rounds out the disc and it begins with beautifully shimmering guitar. The tone is lovely and the song quiet and calm. This fades out and then the disc is finished. Alan Sparhawk has crafted an emotive piece that is experimental and raw. Ok, so this isnt for everyone on the planet, but its refreshing. All in all, the tones and guitar lines are

certainly signature Sparhawk, but he does many things new with his instrument on this disc. The drones and fuzz are beautiful and the volume control brilliant. I hope all will give this disc a listen more than once and soak in what Sparhawk has accomplished. Jason Lamoreaux, *Somewhere Cold If Low* offers pop grace with the darker slices tucked in behind the harmonies and slipped in the lyrics, then this solo album by ALAN SPARHAWK is its conjugate. On the surface torn, ragged, thrashed, icy and harsh, but as your ears stare at it, the cracks and gashes unveil more radiant patterns. Not as majestic as NEIL YOUNG's soundtrack to *Dead Man*", but not far off that territory. Some titles here beckon an oceanfaring documentary, but the overall sea change is not so far off *Secret Name and Songs for a Dead Pilot*. Here SPARHAWK has a tossed in a lot more maneuvers than Shakey's wake for Blake. Fog horn drone notes, ripcord string whammy, digi del digital lay de digits. There is even *Eruption* by Eddie Van Halen which makes it sound like an upscale perfume, but I think that is meant to be an emotional cover; if not a whispered message for Eddie to release a solo album of his own, and try and be half as experimental, half as naked, half as honest. And with *How It Ends*", a short warm sweep, you get the sense that ALAN still lives in hope, through solo winters and high LOW summers. Thurston Hunger, *KFJC Solo Guitar* is the first solo exploration by Low's frontman Alan Sparhawk. I'd admit I was definitely thrown a bit of a curve ball with this one, especially with that acoustic guitar on the cover, expecting perhaps just instrumental acoustic guitar music, but I was a bit off in my early guess. Instead Alans debut album is a type of ambient guitar drone similar to *Aarktica*, *Remora*, and *True Colour of Blood*. I'm always impressed by artists like Alan that are able to create this thick flowing wall of sound just by using a guitar. As you listen to this recording it takes you along this stream of dark drones where ambient and melody meet and permit you to enter a comatose like universe where your unable to move and all you can do is drift away silently. Occasionally some actual heavy riffs do pop up (most notable in *Eruption* by Eddie Van Halen) to remind you that your still alive, but then just as the action kicks in it smoothes out and lets you continue your journey uninterrupted. All things considered, Alans debut is an interesting release, but like most experimental music its not something you'll be able to understand immediately. Joe Mlodik, *Lunar Hypnosis* My friends used to make fun of me whenever we started talking about the music of Low, because I would inevitably tell the same story over and over again. It was the story of the first time I saw them in concert, shortly after I had discovered their music. The show was at Omaha's Cog Factory, a sketchy little speakeasy-esque joint that was something of a mainstay in Omaha's alt/underground scene.

Until it was shut down for various infractions several years ago, that is. It was as nondescript and barren as you could get -- concrete floors, a small stage with (maybe) some old PA equipment, stark fluorescent lighting, and thousands of posters covering the walls. Oh, and no temperature control to speak of. Which made the place absolutely frigid on that particular winter evening. There were less than 25 people at the show, and about half of them left after the opening band (obviously, this took place before Low became "big" in certain circles). Those of us who stayed stood there, shivering and watching our breath while Low stood there on the small stage, heads bowed and slightly swaying while delivering one of the most amazing concerts I've ever seen. There was something almost pure and intimate about that evening. The freezing venue, the simple yet overwhelming music (this was around the time they released the stark *The Curtain Hits The Cast*), the small crowd, the absolute silence between songs -- it all resulted in one of the most reverent shows I've experienced. There were two definite highlights from that show. One was "If You Were Born Today", which, if you've heard it, you know is an exceedingly moving Christmas song. The other was a performance of "Do You Know How To Waltz?", the 14-minute drone piece from *The Curtain Hits The Cast*. I've never seen Low perform that song since, but that night, they stretched it well past 14 minutes, creating a wall of sound that left my friends and I absolutely floored. It's one of their finest achievements, a perfect example of Low's ability to control and transform even the simplest sounds into something vast and expansive. Solo Guitar finds Alan Sparhawk delving into the same droney, atmospheric territory contained within "Do You Know How To Waltz?". Or at least, the first (and best) half of the album does. The bulk of this first half is taken up by two songs; "Sagrado Corazon De Jesu (Second Attempt)" and "How A Freighter Comes Into The Harbor", and together, they account for over 30 minutes of feedback-drenched tones, drones, and riffing. Which, if not your cup of tea, you might as well stop reading now. "Sagrado...", which clocks in at just under 14 minutes, has a vaguely middle-eastern sound to it, as Sparhawk improvises and feels his way through various scales and riffs. At times, it comes a little close to "shred" territory, as if Sparhawk took some time to channel his secret Steve Vai fascination. His guitar shrieks and wails, as if he's not so much playing as ripping out the notes. However, the song moves at a very deliberate, even solemn pace, with stretches of silence where one can imagine Sparhawk contemplating, even meditating about the flurry of notes he's about to unleash; meanwhile, in the distance, the amps hum and crackle with feedback and anticipation. And of course, massive drones slowly circle around and throughout, creating a hypnotic and foreboding air that ultimately puts even the

most explosive of Sparhawk's six-string pyrotechnics in perspective. "How A Freighter Comes Into The Harbor" is an even stronger track, mainly because it's much more subdued. The song begins with single notes and simple chords ringing out and quickly disappearing, like foghorns ringing out in middle of the night and quickly muffled by the mist. Piece by piece, Sparhawk begins slowly building the song, laying the elements of the tense, ringing drone that will ultimately serve as the song's foundation. It's fascinating to look past what Sparhawk is doing at times, and focus only on what's taking place in the background. You can practically hear the amps building up steam until the high, keening central drone finally emerges. It's difficult to call the piece "beautiful", as strong and arresting as it may be, due to the strong sense of mourning and foreboding that manifests itself early on and never subsides. In keeping with the title's nautical theme, it plays out like a elegy for drowned sailors, or perhaps an attempt to convey the sense of despair and loss as the waters closed in over their heads. And that high, keening drone, as it becomes more layered and intense, sounds increasingly like the cries of ghosts and banshees from across a godforsaken black sea. Once the dronework gets going, it's hard to imagine that Sparhawk has any control over it whatsoever. Notes and guitar strums occasionally ring out, as do miscellaneous reverberations, but they are either quickly silenced by the drones, or quickly possessed and subsumed by them. In the song's final moments, the drones attain critical mass, collapsing in on themselves (and Sparhawk's amps) like reefs tearing through a ship's hull. The result is a twisted, screaming mass of feedback along the lines of David Pearce and Richard Walker's finest moments. "How the weather hits the freighter..." implies the worst sort of storms you encounter in the open water, with huge swells of sound slamming into the listener from all sides. Unfortunately, at just under two minutes, it never has time to develop into anything else. And thus begins the album's second half, which is considerably patchier. The last five songs are mere sketches, if even that. They either clock in under a minute, or just rumble along with no time to development any interesting sounds that may appear. Rather, they go nowhere -- but make a lot of godawful noise while doing it. Case in point: "How The Engine Room Sounds", which, with Alan's rumbling guitar, crackling feedback, and wordless, noise-soaked screams (which somehow made it over here from a Black-Eyed Snakes record), probably does sound like an engine room. But that doesn't mean it's at all interesting to listen to. Solo Guitar will probably not appeal to most folks who are Low fans. If you're a fan of songs such as "Over The Ocean", "Shame", "Dinosaur Act", "Canada", "California", "Starfire", etc., you'll probably find this stuff a little too out there for your sensibilities. Even



longtime fans who pick this up as a matter of due course will probably find themselves put off by Solo Guitar's second, arguably weaker half. But Low have always had an experimental side to them, and have never been afraid of playing with more obtuse, less accessible sounds on recordings such as The Curtain Hits The Cast, Songs For A Dead Pilot, and even Trust. If you're enamored with that particular side of Low, than there are certainly parts of Solo Guitar that you'll find fascinating and challenging, even if they leave your ears ringing afterwards. Many folks enjoyed the more rock-oriented sound that Low played with on The Great Destroyer. But Low's earlier material, which found them dabbling in these darker, more drone-oriented moments, are what solidified that minimalist aesthetic of their's in the first place, and are what arguably made them into the band they are today. Sparhawk's guitar explorations, as obtuse and patchy as they are from time to time, do contain hints of those earlier moments of beautiful, difficult sound (such as "Do You Know How To Waltz?") And if these more challenging sounds do manage to somehow find their way into Low's future recordings, where they are polished and refined by Low's minimalist aesthetic, than I certainly won't mind. I can't think of a band that I want to see doing 15-minute noise/drone excursions more than this particular Minnesota trio. Jason Morehead, Opus

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