

Mp3 Chris Whitley - Soft Dangerous Shores



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Whitley's aim in mixing deep-blues feel and rich jazz harmonies with shape-shifting rhythm beds and electronic ambience was "to create something erotic, something that you could almost touch -- a prime goal in music for me." 11 MP3 Songs FOLK: Folk Blues, ROCK: Folk Rock Details: Chris Whitley is in a manifesto mood as the singer/guitarist rolls yet more tobacco on the couch in his apartment in New York's West Village. "Love and death, that's what this record is about," he declares. "That's what all art is, or should be, about." The music whirling around the room is *Soft Dangerous Shores* -- Whitley's mesmeric new album, his twelfth so far and sixth for Messenger Records. The CD is set on repeat, with its air of organic/synthetic alchemy seeming to blend into the smoke trailing under the hallway's half-moon apse. Head lolled back, Whitley half-sings, half-moans along to the album's fading coda, as the disc spins around again. In lieu of explicating the title song, he hands over a dog-eared copy of *The Writings Depart* by surrealist avatar Andr Breton. Not long before, the National Steel virtuoso had said, "The blues as a form holds no interest for me." Now he adds, pointing to a page in the book, "This is the blues to me . . ." Desire and despair, eroticism and exoticism all mingle in a stanza from a Breton poem: "A rip in the surface of the heart / The morning papers bring women singers / Whose voices are the color of sand / On soft dangerous shores." In his take on "Soft Dangerous Shores," Whitley breathes an indigo-hued romanticism into the image; he pines for communion, however elusive, as his album's title song culminates in the lines, "As two awake / Behind burning doors / You follow her thoughts / Out soft and dangerous shores." Love and death, love or death, love despite death, love because of death. Longing and loss intertwine almost subliminally through *Soft Dangerous Shores*, as much in sound as in sense -- in "words underground," as the line goes in the tolling new song "Last Million Miles." And it's the haunted, haunting sonic aura of this album that will turn the listener's head. Like Whitley's 2000 album *Rocket*

House, if more intimate and inward, the new album sees the ages-old timbre of Whitley's six raw strings resonating through a digital rattle and hum; the mix manages to reconcile Whitley's seemingly irreconcilable passions of John Lee Hooker and Kraftwerk. It's a "Euro-trash/folk-blues thing," he avers, shrugging. Whitley recorded *Soft Dangerous Shores* with bassist Heiko Schramm and drummer Matthias Macht, the supple German rhythm team on board for *Hotel Vast Horizon* (Messenger, 2003). Malcolm Burn was at the helm, producing and engineering the record in his Kingston, N.Y., studio. Burn's sepia-toned keyboards were also the source of the album's hovering atmospherics. Whitley's relationship with Burn goes back to his classic Columbia debut album, 1991's *Living With the Law*, which Burn produced and co-engineered (as he has also done for albums by Emmylou Harris and the Neville Brothers, among others). More than a decade later, the two "still relate -- we feel the same things," Whitley says. "Malcolm is a cinematographer in sound. With this record, I totally trusted him to really interpret the songs sonically." Whitley's aim in mixing deep-blues feel and rich jazz harmonies with shape-shifting rhythm beds and electronic ambience was "to create something erotic, something that you could almost touch -- a prime goal in music for me," he insists. "I have no time for records that aren't erotically charged. And I hear the erotic in a lot of things other people might not. To me, Iggy, Bowie, Monk, Satie, Little Walter, Bob Marley, John Lennon, the Flaming Lips are all erotic." Like an ambient fulcrum around which the rest of the album pivots is the six-and-a-half-minute erotic wonder "City of Women." The track builds slowly as dusky electronic clouds hang over a programmed rhythm tread, with a whistle bleeding in as if from another room. Whitley's lonely, ice-sculpture guitar adds to the tension before he begins to vocalize, languid yet intense as he mixes half-speech with broken falsetto to make his sensualist's plea for understanding in a town of temptation: "I know these desires could kill me dead / How you gonna act instead / Where everywhere I go / Is wet and red." *Soft Dangerous Shores* reprises a track off of Whitley's from-the-hip masterpiece *War Crime Blues* (a Messenger release and one of last year's most unsung albums, an emotionally acute song suite that serves as both salt and salve for collective wounds). Here, "Her Furious Angels" gets "the Marvin Gaye treatment," Whitley says, justifying the remake by adding, "sometimes the song is right, but you're wrong." One of the lines from that song points to the change in Whitley's perspective over the past five years. "Looking out from your bed / As if I just got born" evokes a man able to see with new eyes. For the past few years, Whitley has spent the majority of his off-road time in Dresden, Germany, where he has developed key creative partnerships

(like his rhythm section). In their various ways, Hotel Vast Horizon, War Crime Blues and now Soft Dangerous Shores were deeply informed by his cross-cultural experience. "Even being Texas trash, I've realized things living in Dresden," Whitley says. "For instance, how much people from other cultures have had to deal with so much for far longer than we have -- from the worst war crimes to being thrown into jail for playing music on the street, which happened to Heiko and Matthias when they were teenagers." He adds that "the void in contemporary humanity" doesn't feel as vast in the former East Germany, where people -- for all of the region's growing pains -- "at least feel the impetus of love and death very clearly." Of the songs inspired by Dresden, "Valley of the Innocents" refers to snipes that Westerners had for residents of the Elbe River Valley, whose freedom from media-saturated sophistication was lost with the fall of the Iron Curtain. "They're supposed to be nave, but I prefer to think of it as a kind of purity that's rare now," Whitley says. One of the album's most beguiling songs, "Fireroad (for two)" may usher in the disc with a bumping drum intro and otherworldly melody, but it retails a shadowy vision. Whitley says, "I've heard people's stories, or maybe dreamed them after hearing so many similar things, of women standing on the glowing roads that led to Dresden with babies in their arms, watching the city burn after the bombing in World War II." He adds, "On a far more mundane level, part of the song also refers to the Village here, where I grew up and which has mostly disappeared; at least its old revolutionary ethos has gone. The roads may be all lit up, but the city will never be the same and sometimes you want to escape."

Whitley put in formative years busking on the streets of New York City, after moving from state to state with his art director father and sculptress mother (who passed away late last year, a tangible loss that figures into the undercurrent of Soft Dangerous Shores). Born on Aug. 31, 1960, in Houston, Whitley spent years in Dallas and then Oklahoma, Connecticut, Mexico and Vermont. His parents "grew up on race radio in the South," with the real deal -- Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf leading to Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix -- seeping into their son's soul. (Just as Whitley's music has seeded that of his daughter, the 17-year-old Trixie, who occasionally harmonizes with him on stage and on record.) Whitley's hit debut Living With the Law yielded such classic Americana evocations as "Make the Dirt Stick," "Big Sky Country," "Forget You Every Day" and the title cut -- all remade for the 2004 solo reclamation album Weed. That Messenger disc also features confessional versions of such Whitley totems as "Narcotic Prayer" (from the power-trio riot Din of Ecstasy, 1995) and "Cool Wooden Crosses" (Terra Incognita, his Sony swan song of '96). With the barn-bred Dirt Floor (Messenger, '98), Whitley stripped down and

stepped up to the indie challenge, armed with just guitar, banjo, time-keeping boot and such gritty songs as the title lament and "Scrapyard Lullabies." Recorded the next year in Chicago, the Messenger set Live at Martyrs' documents solo Whitley on the boards on a great night. As with Dirt Floor, Craig Street produced the all-covers set Perfect Day (Valley, 2000), recorded with the earthy rhythm duo from Medeski, Martin Wood. Whitley not only beautifully reanimated songs by Muddy Waters ("She's Alright"), Robert Johnson ("Stones in My Pathway") and Bob Dylan ("Fourth Time Around"); he cut to the poetic heart of the Doors' "Crystal Ship" and Lou Reed's "Perfect Day." For Whitley's fall 2000 ATO release Rocket House, Tony Mangurian's production opened new sonic vistas, from the buzzing electro-rock of the opener "To Joy (Revolution of the Innocents)" to the aching dreamscape of the closing "Something Shines." Surveying the Columbia years and more, Long Way Around: An Anthology 1991-2001 includes the lyrical Rocket House single "Say Goodbye" and such Dirt Floor highlights as "Accordingly," as well as previously unreleased demos and alternative mixes. That brings us to Whitley's Dresden period -- which has yielded some of his best work as a writer ("Frontier," Hotel Vast Horizon) and interpreter ("Nature Boy," War Crime Blues) -- not to mention his album-length film scoring debut (for the German film Pigs Will Fly). Like almost any troubadour, Whitley is, or has to be, a romantic, even a wary idealist. "I've spent whole tours feeling I'll never get back to her -- whether it's a woman, a country, a place or a feeling of empathy," he sighs in the small hours amid the empty glasses, cluttered plates and yet another roll-up. With Soft Dangerous Shores, the singer/guitarist continues his quest to express the "universal blues," the song of love and death that Robert Johnson and Jimi Hendrix knew but so may have, in his way, Andr Breton. "The blues sound different in different places," Whitley says. "But on a lonely, rainy night -- whether you're in New Orleans or New York, Dresden, Germany, or Ghent, Belgium -- they feel the same." Bradley Bambarger People who are interested in should consider this download.

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