



Teenage Jesus and Beirut Slump

Shut Up and Bleed

Atavistic; 2008

By

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The early work of Lydia Lunch often gets linked inextricably to no wave, the post-punk movement that burned through downtown New York in the late 1970's. That's accurate-- her nihilistic, audience-defying attitude helped define the movement (some claim she even coined the term). But it's also a bit unfair. Lunch's music would be bracingly unique anywhere, anytime, as would the path she took to get there.

The basic plot would sound wild if it happened now, so imagine how gutsy it seemed back then: In 1976, at age 16, Lydia Koch runs away from her upstate New York home, crashes in a hippies' loft in Manhattan, befriends Suicide and the Dead Boys and foists her poetry on them, and eventually launches a band called Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. "The driving vision behind Teenage Jesus was to castrate the tradition of melody and composition," she wrote in a memoir included in this disc, "and simply vent in the most primal way possible the horrible din of my own torture."

That may sound over the top, but it's an understatement compared to how Teenage Jesus actually sounded. Over harsh, dogmatic beats, gravity-drenched bass, and exploding slide guitar, Lunch screamed out her obsessions with torture, imprisonment, and bodily harm. "Take a bullet to my eyes/ Blow them out and see if I die"; "Little orphans running through the bloody snow"; "The dishes are cracked, the forks are plastic/ The food is in cellophane, and I puke elastic." Lunch's short, spiked songs were the musical equivalent of avant-garde slasher movies. (No wonder no wave directors like Vivienne Dick and Beth and Scott B. often made Lydia the star of their films).

All this blood and guts comes across vividly on *Shut Up and Bleed*, the most complete compilation to date of Teenage Jesus' work. (Atavistic previously released one called *Everything*, but it had less material, and it definitely didn't sound this good). Not that there was a lot to compile: the band released only two 7-inches and a 12-inch EP, along with an appearance on Brian Eno's compilation *No New York*.

But *Shut Up and Bleed* adds the posthumous *Pre-Teenage Jesus* EP (recorded when future Contortion James Chance was in the band), some fiery live tracks from the earlier Lunch compilation *Hysterie*, and, most excitingly, two previously-unreleased live cuts. Those were recorded at the 1978 Artists' Space festival which inspired Eno to create *No New York*. "Eliminate by Night" is a 45-second stomp that fits perfectly into the band's lightning-bolt oeuvre. "Roll Your Thunder" is a minimalist march, with Bradley Field's lock-step snare slicing through Jim Sclavunos' monster bass and Lunch's drill-sergeant commands. According to the liner notes, the group played 16 songs at Artists' Space (including *four* versions of the screeching instrumental "Red Alert"); here's hoping Atavistic can eventually unleash them all.

Teenage Jesus burned out in just a couple of years (Lunch's M.O. was to make her point and move on immediately), but even in that short window, she found time for another band. Lunch intended Beirut Slump to be "slow, torturous...a bloody drag," and she succeeded. Borrowing Sclavunos to play drums, she added filmmaker Dick on keyboards and siblings Liz and Bobby Swope on bass and vocals, respectively. The band's dominant elements are Dick's drones and Swope's B-movie moans. On shivery cuts like the lurching "Try Me" and the woozy "Staircase", Swope is like a musical Ed Wood, directing his group through foggy cemeteries and over-lit swamps. Beirut Slump was ultimately a footnote to Teenage Jesus (the band released one single and played just three shows), but a footnote worth reading.

Shut Up and Bleed's only weakness is bizarre sequencing. It's as if someone threw the tracks into the air like a deck of cards and let the resulting random mess dictate order. Cuts by both bands are interspersed, and simple logic-- like maybe putting the two tracks from the same single next to each other-- is rarely heeded. Anyone listening with history in mind will have to craft a new playlist (and good luck reading the dark discographical symbols). But that confusion doesn't diminish the power of the music here-- music made by a singular legend at the peak of her adolescent powers.

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