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Therapy?: A Brief Crack of Light

 By [Chris Conaton](#) 5 November 2012

Therapy?'s fleeting taste of mainstream success came in the early to mid-'90s, when Nirvana's rising tide lifted all sorts of bands who otherwise wouldn't ever have had a chance of showing up on the radio. They've always been a band that toes the line between metal and punk, but singer/guitarist/songwriter Andrew Cairns also has an ear for melody. So singles like "Screamager" and "Nowhere" were catchy enough to earn the band airplay in the heyday of grunge and alternative music. 1994's *Troublegum* album was one of the underrated gems of that decade, but '95's *Infemal Love* was a knottier, more difficult record. When that album failed to replicate the band's earlier success, they lost their major label deal and slid back into the underground.

But Cairns and bassist Michael McKeegan have kept the band alive, and *A Brief Crack of Light*, their eleventh album, finds them just as hard-hitting as ever. Opening track and lead single "Living in the Shadow of the Terrible Thing" is a great illustration of what Therapy? does well. A pulsating bass line drives the song alongside Neil Cooper's tight, compact drumming. Cairns' shout-sung chorus seems wordy—"Alone and unnoticed on the busy street / I'm living in the shadow of the terrible thing / Windows shatter and alarm bells ring / I'm living in the shadow of the terrible thing"—but it's surprisingly easy to sing along with it. Strange little touches give the song character, like the odd decaying guitar noise that follows the chorus, and the unexpected snare drum rolls from Cooper. The pounding "Plague Bell" comes next, and its placement almost seems like a reaction to the relative accessibility of "Living in the Shadow of the Terrible Thing". A static bass and kick drum rhythm thump along under Cairns' fully shouted vocals. Meanwhile, Cairns' guitar fills the gaps where he isn't doubling the main rhythm with squalling noise, and he tops it off with a dimactic, completely amelodic guitar solo.

These opening two tracks are a sort of mission statement for the album, showcasing the two types of songs the band has always done quite well. Having established that, Therapy? spends a lot of *A Brief Crack of Light* on small musical experiments. The wordless "Marlow" begins with catchy guitar harmonics and simple hi-hat cymbals before opening up into a more fully fleshed out upbeat track. Cairns adds a singsongy guitar riff to the song and then actually sings along with the riff. Cooper even goes so far as expand that simple hi-hat rhythm into a full-on disco beat at certain points in the song. "Get Your Dead Hand Off My Shoulder" starts as a typical slower song, driven by McKeegan's bass and utilizing minimal guitar. The twist is that Cairns does the chorus a cappella, so the song seems to stop dead every time he sings "Time speeds up / I get older / Get your dead hand off my shoulder." It makes the creepy post-chorus guitar riff even more effective, and when the bridge of the song stops completely for several seconds, you honestly can't tell if the song is over or just taking a break until Cairns starts singing again.



Therapy?

A Brief Crack of Light
(Global Music Group; US: 25 Sep 2012; UK: 6 Feb 2012)

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This minimalism is followed by "Ghost Trio", a song that features Cairns playing the same guitar rhythm on a single note throughout the entire song. The bass, drums, and vocals proceed as normal, and it's a strong song for the band. At over five minutes long, it feels like the band is stretching out and jamming on this simple riff. From the way the riff is de-emphasized through the course of the song, it almost seems like Cairns wrote the track as sort of an easter egg for sharp-eared listeners.

Less successful is the album-dosing "Ecclesiastes". It's an uncharacteristically quiet track, with a very basic guitar melody and barely-there drums. Cairns' voice is heavily processed into distorted robot vocals, and practically the only lyrics are "Everything under the sun / Is absurd." As a change of pace, it's well-intentioned, but the repetitive nature of the music and lyrics makes you feel every second of the almost six minutes.

The rest of *A Brief Crack of Light* is right in the band's wheelhouse, splitting the difference between catchier material and harsher songs. "Before You, With You, After You" is a punchy track that uses the same robot vocals as "Ecclesiastes" but limits them to singing harmony on the song's chorus. It's much more effective in this more limited context. The band's willingness to tinker with their basic sound on this album gives it a feeling of freshness without straying too far from what they do best. Even after 20-plus years, the band still has a lot of snap and energy, and that feeling permeates most of this album.

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