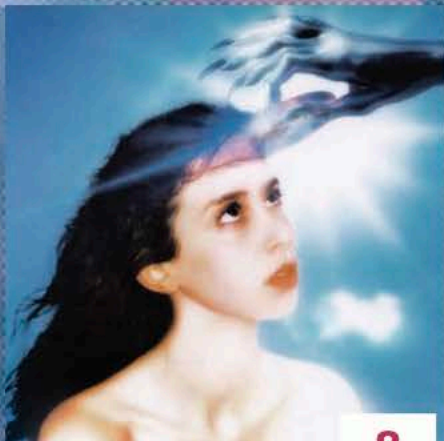


Album Reviews

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Fresh

Magdalena Bay *Imaginal Disk*

Released August 23, 2024

Label Mom+Pop Music

Genre Synthpop

Tasty tracks "Image," "Vampire in the Corner," "That's My Floor," "Cry for Me"

"If time is meant for living, why's it killing me?" Mica Tenenbaum cries at the end of "Killing Time," as a menacing guitar riff descends and drums barrage behind her, drowning out her expressions of dread. She regains control and the sonic assault clears, her voice rising to the surface of the mix — "Now I'm taking mine" is followed by an angelic vocal run that reverberates and gently fades before soft keys pick up the next track. The back and forth between despair and renewal occurs repeatedly throughout Magdalena Bay's second album, *Imaginal Disk*. Their debut, *Mercurial World*, worshiped the internet as a source of constant distraction. The duo was trapped in a dopamine-driven loop, constantly diverted from real life. In its seamless auditory transition from the end of *Mercurial World*, *Imaginal Disk* thematically breaks free from their unending daydream and finds the duo face-to-face with reality. They stare directly into the mirror and embrace past superficial preoccupations, determined to align themselves with a more fulfilled reflection.

Sprawling, Windows XP wallpaper-esque fields were the frequent starting point of *Imaginal Disk*'s early promo. The peaceful expanse provided a neutral foundation

for Magdalena Bay to structure the world they envisioned — one that promises their light-hearted, joyous synth-pop core, yet slowly cracks to reveal a foreboding current flowing under the surface. *Imaginal Disk* takes full advantage of the space, pulling influences from disco to prog rock to psychedelia to push the boundaries of their already singular sound. Lead single "Death & Romance" views life as a battle between the two. It's a fiery feat that tests the line of overproduction, as the unrestrained essence of extremes manifests through piano, drums, guitar, synths, and vocals all turned up to ten. By contrast, "Tunnel Vision" opens as a gentle lullaby. It ebbs and flows between faith and fear as the track builds pressure, slowly adding more complexities and finally pulling back to its original state before all the pressure is released in its final minute. Magdalena Bay is at its most unhinged as resounding alarms, Tenenbaum's screams, and textured synths fracture the fields, putting the chaos underneath on full display. The constant left turns and alterations chart a clear course. Magdalena Bay is doing some serious soul searching, experimenting as much as possible to see what works and ideally land on their true essence.

Every experiment on *Imaginal Disk* is slick and brimming with expertise. Through all the bursts of blissful, synth-laden production, it's hard to detect the slew of existential anxieties on first listen. Luckily, Tenenbaum's lyrics offer a peek into her mind. On "Watching T.V." a simple melody induces hypnosis, caught in a mind-numbed state after hours in front of a screen. Stuck in the trance, Tenenbaum coolly slides in a verse about the struggle of cleanliness, feeling she needs to scrub her skin until she bleeds and hang it up to dry to be fully purified. All the while the melody persists and her voice is airy — catch the body horror if you can. These winks and nods repeatedly given off by Magdalena Bay allow for the record's ultimate successful payoff. The loose concept sci-fi story of *True Blue* and her unfortunate forehead disk insertion-inspired identity crisis can't be cringe if it's all ironic. Or symbolic. Or overproduced to the point of absurdity.

Whatever it may be, it's an inside joke that perplexes and delights, muses and inspires.

Magdalena Bay thrives in the kitschy, half-serious details that exist throughout their work. Aliens poke, prod, and put wires in their heads on the punchy, ominous "Fear, Sex," and "Feeling Diskinserted?" furthers the disk imagery with a clever play on words. The repeated jokes and theatrics underscore the serious considerations of questions about identity and what its attributes consist of. Though reveling in the irony, facades can only be kept up for so long. On "Cry for Me," the duo drops the humor and gets serious. With one final push after all their mental overexertion, they completely hit their stride; the cyclical percussion grounds the track's celestial strings and twinkling, disco synths. It culminates in a profound transcendent experience; Tenenbaum raves in the elation of her goal accomplished by repeatedly screaming "Oh, I did it all for you! For you! For you! And you! And you!" in the ferocious outro. Entirely raw and vulnerable, the duo permits the necessary breakdown that comes before progress. Their answers lie within their deepest selves, not behind the walls they build.

Imaginal Disk is a reminder to put genuine effort into developing a relationship with the self instead of running away from it. Ultimately, the message is clear — "it's here, it's you." The whisperings of "True Blue Interlude" towards the front end of the record foreshadow that *Imaginal Disk* is not just Magdalena Bay's journey, or the story of *True Blue*; it happens to everyone. In an age of infinite distractions and access to so many strangers' lives, the journey to self-discovery will never be easy. Whether your path takes you through an otherworldly adventure where your personality is removed from your skull or follows a more straightforward track to gratification, the destination will always be complete and total fulfillment.

TC Stephens (Political Science and Philosophy)