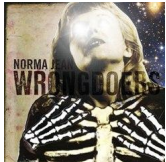


Norma Jean - Wrongdoers (2013)

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 06 March 2014 16:46 - Last Updated Thursday, 27 September 2018 08:32

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1. "Hive Minds" 6:44 2. "If You Got It at Five, You Got It at Fifty" 2:17 3. "Wrongdoers" 4:49 4. "The Potter Has No Hands" 3:16 5. "Sword in Mouth, Fire Eyes" 4:25 6. "Afterhour Animals" 0:50 7. "The Lash Whistled Like a Singing Wind" 1:07 8. "Neck in the Hemp" 3:10 9. "Triffids" 3:33 10. "Funeral Singer" 5:01 11. "Sun Dies, Blood Moon"

Musicians: Cory Brandan – vocals, guitars Chris Day – guitars Jeff Hickey - guitars
Goose Holyoak - drums John Finnegan – bass + Patrick Bellah and Baron Lyle - cello
and violin Adam Putman - background vocals, cymbal Aaron Crawford - second drums
Wolf Kindler - guest vocals Daniel Holyoak - keyboards

The very concept of a "guilty pleasure" has never made a great deal of sense to me. If you like something, you should be able to like it without fear of reprimand. With that being said, Norma Jean are a band that I've always enjoyed, yet never felt the urge to go out and tell people how much I enjoyed. Any way you look at it, the very idea of being a "Christian metalcore band" is pretty dorky. However, they were a good band when they were shamelessly ripping off We Are The Romans in their early years, and they were a good band when they added more melodic Thrice/Brand New-esque elements to their sound on albums like The Anti-Mother and Meridional. Wrongdoers, their sixth full-length, finds the group hearkening back to the heaviness of their early work, crafting possibly their most aggressive record yet, but in a completely new way that is anything but a retreat.

Wrongdoers starts off strong with "Hive Minds," a seven-minute mini-epic that segues from Nine Inch Nails-evoking industrial noise into crushing sludge metal that reminds listeners the group is from Georgia. The new rhythm section of bassist John Finnegan and drummer Clayton Holyoak make their presence known almost immediately, and really get to shine in the track's relatively mellow midsection. "Hive Minds" has a melodic chorus that wouldn't feel out of place on Norma Jean's last couple of records, but it is much more frantic and choppy than most of those recordings, setting the pace for what comes next.

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What comes next is "If You Got It at Five, You Got It at Fifty," arguably the heaviest song the band has ever written. It sounds more like friends and frequent tour mates Every Time I Die pushed to their most extreme than it does anything in the Norma Jean back catalog. There are blast beats, breakdowns, mathy Dillinger Escape Plan riffs, and not a trace of anything resembling a clean vocal to be found. It's awesome, and makes a strong case for if not a whole record done in this style, a more aggressive side project. Mid-album standout "The Lash Whistled Like a Singing Wind" follows a similar template, but brings in more of the Botch influence that the band spent so long trying to get away from.

Songs like the title track (which might contain the group's catchiest chorus ever) and especially "Sword In Mouth, Fire Eyes" have a big, melodic, radio metal feel to them, and tend to clash with the more aggressive material, which is what Norma Jean do best. The one exception is closing number "Sun Dies, Blood Moon." In its fourteen minute-plus runtime, the song shifts through more moods and musical styles than some bands do in their entire careers. Its bluesy guitar intro gives way to a melodic prog-metal Tool-styled verse, into some crushing mathcore heaviness, eventually seguing into a Sunn O)))-like drone, with a few detours in between. It's a huge gamble and probably the group's biggest experiment to date, comprising nearly a third of the album's runtime, but it pays off immensely.

Vocalist/lyricist Cory Brandan seems to enjoy pushing the boundaries of what he can get away with and still have NJ be considered a "Christian band." (Last time I saw the group perform live, he was wearing an AC/DC Highway To Hell shirt. There's light swearing throughout Wrongdoers, and talk of smoking cigarettes in the aforementioned "Sun Dies, Blood Moon." This rebellious streak applies to the group's music as well. They're not afraid to step outside the box, and subsequently have crafted what is perhaps their best album yet, better than anyone could have expected of them at this point in career, and better than anything any of their peers have crafted in years. Gully pleasures be damned, I might just run out and buy a Norma Jean shirt. ---punknews.org

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