

Review of *Remastered in Stereo*

It is no longer possible or tasteful for me to keep track of the praises with which I have lauded *Remastered in Stereo*, the first release of the Princess Towers artistic project. The album is undeniably a crowning gem of Kingstoniana, certainly an important contribution to the ever-growing canon of songs inspired by the slow trial of young adulthood, and definitely a major accomplishment in the marriage of simple, subtle music and good, tender lyricism.

Though *Remastered in Stereo* is the debut accomplishment of the Princess Towers band, it represents an intriguing and (as it strikes me) courageous development in the ongoing collaboration of an evolving group of Kingston musicians, marking a clear evolution from the successfully serious and rhythmically powerful tone of *Sending Out, Receiving* — a dramatic and vibrant exploration of demands for existential clarity, expressions of outright angst, and buoyant gasps of redemption put out four years earlier by the sister band known as Silent Systems. From the perilous-yet-elegantly-traversed heights of that forceful dispatch on the intense adventure of striking out into the early years of maturity, *Remastered in Stereo* appears on the surface as something like a relieved admission of simpler truths, or a recognition of the beauties and wonders of attention paid to questions and themes less grand.

Nonetheless, a consistent artistic philosophy holds fast between these productions: the same muse which expressed itself in the roaring and rapid bursts of youthful energy or profound stirrings of *Sending Out, Receiving* are set free to speak through the more familiar and familial objects and surroundings of *Remastered in Stereo*. And indeed, just as *Sending Out, Receiving* contains a fine balance of desperate optimism and serene pessimism, *Remastered in Stereo* seems to offer two distinct halves, each one a careful transmission of the comic or tragic mood.

In what follows, I want to offer a brief review of these two parts of this provocative series of reflections on the musical experience, of transit through liminal spaces, the simplicity of grace, and of small things well considered.

Part One. Hi-Fi Freaks, Nowherecation, Minor Gods, Thinking Small.

The album opens to the tinny guitar-and-drum opening of “Hi-Fi Freaks” — a curious ode to instrument-oriented nostalgia, missed opportunities, and aesthetic chances/changes — before popping into a well-produced register as the bass line kicks in and a new depth to the melody articulates itself. Already this transition speaks to the theme of the song, which has to do with the curious algebra of a timeless musical impulse and its tumultuous expression through ever-differing technologies and sensibilities. A lot of this one I simply don’t get — the confident and complex affective attachments towards certain styles and sounds of production simply go over my head, as a critic without any technical skill to speak of (though isn’t there something pleasant about not quite knowing what’s going on — it reminds one of being a kid, sleepy at the adults table, comfortable in the presence of unfathomably wise and very competent giants). What I do understand, however, is the song’s capture of the mysterious experience of found objects, and the abandoned histories of which they bear the traces. For Princess Towers, it’s clear enough — there’s some magic left behind in these humble artifacts of the early electronic age: old keyboards, video-tapes without a device to play them, great pieces of art with an eager audience

trapped unreachably in decades past. There's something eternal in these delicate relics of creativity, and the yearning for ever-increasing fidelity that they represent. It's something Davy Jones (for some reason the mascot of this tune) could always know, and that is a comfort.

Things really kick off after this short opener with "Nowherecation," a song which is somehow about the peculiar locality of Kingston, and the joyously lazy 'here and now' of anywhere at all. If the subtle ethical undertone of "Hi-Fi Freaks" addressed the importance of appreciating old things as they were, "Nowherecation" suggests we also remember and enjoy the most familiar places as they are. This subtle anti-development, anti-consumption care for simplicity expresses itself in an upbeat and playful enumeration of the joys of staying at home, reminding us that the abundance we seek through developing the vast infrastructures of distant travel can also be found by simply looking around where we already happen to be. The toned-down guitar riff pairs with an adventurous rise and fall of the bass, such that the song almost feels like floating down the Rideau — it is essentially the music of the mid-afternoon: lively, spacious, and yet absolutely full. The lilting punctuation of the chorus by the gathering drums gives the impression of your front door opening and closing as friends come by without disturbing the peace of the day. Only the gently-tilted bridge gives the impression of a possibility of getting lost in a place that should be very familiar (a secret suggestion, perhaps, of the ghostliness that characterizes the album's second half). On this song, the backing vocals (I think it's Piner here as elsewhere in the album), strain at the edges of ease, managing to remain perfectly contained in the prism of a slow summery feeling. A close friend of the songwriter and myself once ventured the claim that the best way to find God is to take a long look at any square foot of ground where things grow. Slowness, and a kind of presence or openness to the highly local — these are, in fact, important elements in the good posture of receiving something even as grand as grace.

The first half of the album reaches its emotional climax with "Minor Gods," a rhythmically complex and vocally rich prayer (or poem) that gives name to the otherwise hidden residence of the divine in what is very ordinary. Finding that elusive sock to complete the pair, toast that comes out just right, a satisfying sneeze — these are the gifts of this understated godly agency. The song plays with the common conception of the miraculous as the intrusion of something extraordinary and unpredictable; the artist, calling our attention to the precarious sequence of improbabilities that coincide in (and comprise) our everyday life, reframes the quotidian as a continuous breaking through of this very strange familiar into itself — certainly a spectacle worthy of awe, at least every once in a while. This song also explicitly mentions the 'muse' of these small things, the 'small angels' and 'small ones above', which sings through the whole album — in a way, perhaps "Minor Gods" articulates the theme of the wider project. To give thanks for any modicum of success, any moment of completion, the satisfaction of any prediction whatsoever — this is the obedience due to these minor gods. Yes, happily, there's something here for any red-blooded Rosenzweigean to sink their hooks into. The subtly jazzy backing guitar is just good fun, and the multiplication of Ardens in the chorus' vocal track is only delightful.

And for any religion, of course, there is an appropriate philosophical comportment. "Thinking Small" marks the culmination of the gentle playfulness and grounded gracefulness of this

album's comic trajectory. This song reframes the theme of attention to the small, introducing for the first time the aspects of this ethical stance that are to dominate the second act of the album — the ambivalent growth away from the angsty paroxysms of adolescence; return to the familiar environment of home, of Kingston; a kind of exasperated relation to the possibility of there being more out there, some kind of excess or remainder from our pasts that won't leave us alone as we turn to the future. For the time being, however, "Thinking Small" remains comforting on the whole. Reminding us that there are seasons of life, and that in the breaks we all must take (the bad breaks, the break-ups; as well as the pauses and the rests, and the good breakfasts in Wolfe Island morning light), there is something beautiful. Guessing, resting, feeling a bit lost, feeling a bit relaxed, leaving stones unturned and things unsaid (for now) — these acts announce an artistic maturity in its early stages. As the bright sharpness of ecstatic philosophy wanes, a kind of quiet wisdom and patient pleasure open up. It's a blossom that makes the background.

The first half of *Remastered in Stereo* consists of the harmonious themes of these four love songs: to the curious and still-living technological history of musical instruments, to Kingston as an emblem of what is familiar everywhere, to the little blessings that sustain us and deserve our notice, and to the kind of attitude under which small things begin to glow with a simple fullness.

Part Two. Kingston Crawler, Radio Ghost, One Tacoma, Haunted Walk.

The cautious and uncertain drum beats that open "Kingston Crawler" somehow set the pace for the entire second half of the album. Right away this song makes itself clear — it's a bit sadder, a bit slower, a bit more uncertain, and a bit creepier than what's come before (it might remind you of the buglike feeling of going a bit too far with the ketamine...). These insectoid sonic features then find a very meet expression in the delightful character of the Kingston Crawler — a recent graduate of some bug university, returned to Kingston to traverse (feeling lost and lonely) the La Salle Causeway, and draw weird images in the mud on the banks of the Great Cataraqui. But right away, perhaps just as we begin to despair for the poor creepy Crawler, there is a turn to something truly beautiful in this — a reassurance which yet remains truly scary. "Who invites him? Who invites him in?" asks the song. We may love the distant little soft-voiced chorus, but these are ghosts that sing here. We've left childhood behind. How did we get here? How can home not feel like it anymore? And so the Crawler announces the redeeming theme of the profound unmooredness that characterizes new adulthood — there are, somehow, people who invite us into a togetherness which, nonetheless, must be partly unfamiliar. Yehuda Amichai, late in his life, announced his trust in the fact that "at this very moment / millions of human beings are standing at crossroads / and intersections, in jungles and deserts, / showing each other where to turn, what the right way is, / which direction." This "new religion" of "excited voices" and "a nod of the head" is what the Kingston Crawler has found, and what he now indicates to us. But it's not an easy victory. Hours spent petrified in the crawl spaces mark the Crawler as a kind of perpetual outsider, always just having left the room, always off somewhere vague on his own, shy and (yes, it is the theme) very uncertain. Still, we leave this fifth song of the album with some faith in that old Kingston Crawler — and through that tender faith, we can probably find some solidarity, even some sober affection, for ourselves.

Okay, this next song starts off really delightful: almost circuslike, vibrant, enchanted. But what's that? There's a touch of darkness in this playfulness. He's all alone, that towering princess, haunted by the hideous groans of the Radio Ghost. If "Hi-Fi Freaks" concerned the joys of being at home in music, and "Nowherecation" was about the sunny side of what's most familiar, "Radio Ghost" explores the underbelly of these feelings, giving voice to just how unsettling it is to be moved in mysterious ways by the music that's dear to us. The song is another expression of Princess Towers' careful and caring attention to the technical and technological side of musical creativity — "Is he in the wires, or the speaker cones?" — surely the Radio Ghost cannot be fully intangible, he must have some material body. If he were only a figment of the imagination — well, this would be really upsetting, we'd be trapped with him! Much more likely that he spans some curious series of filaments and transistors. But just like "Kingston Crawler" turned from a basic experience of loneliness to some uncertain promise of togetherness, "Radio Ghost" holds out some hope for, if not connection, then at least commiseration over this disturbing and fleeting experience of being a host to something terrible and unfamiliar. It's a feat, I think, that Princess Towers has written such a tender love song to the very ghost that haunts us as we listen.

If "Minor Gods" was the emotional climax of the album's first part, "One Tacoma" is the emotional pit of the second. Opening with the same kind of drum line as "Kingston Crawler" — it almost sounds like a tune stumbling and nearly falling down a short flight of stairs — this is the leaving song *par excellence*. How can a song capture so perfectly the feeling that comes along with remembering the faded sunlight of our house on Almon Street? It's a secret of that enigmatic Radio Ghost. All that stuff left behind — when we left, we just took whatever we could carry. Here, you can find my favourite little trick of Princess Towers songwriting, where an action that is first introduced through objects is later transposed to us: while at first it is those excess objects, too many to fit into the ride home, that have "all got to go", in the second verse it is "we" who are subjected to this imperative — out of time, with no choice left but to move on (you can find this clever device, if you like it, in the perfect crystal dream prism of "Freak Fairy" on the *Freak Fairy Tales* album). I don't know if you've ever been through a bad breakup, but there comes a moment at the end of the decisive conversation where you just have to steel yourself and rush into walking away. Lingering is not an option, it's too painful. That turn towards new life (though it feels at first, of course, like a collapse into something very much scarier than death), the glance out towards the "open road" — these are the tragic themes of "One Tacoma". I think it's worthy of note that Princess Towers once again makes a symbol out of some very specific artifact of technology — in this case, it's that good Frost family Toyota truck. Giving praise to these vessels is a sweet aspect of the religion of the Minor Gods. But even though the song is marked by these particularities, there's something universal in the gently painful chorus of this leaving song (Piner is triumphant here). Moving out has always been hard, but future generations at least have this tune to keep them company. It's a little tragic, but it's one of the tragedies that is just part of our growing up: we've all got to go, but we can figure it out (what all of that meant, how it might carry us as we learn to carry it) when we get back home.

The last song, “Haunted Walk,” is perhaps the album’s crowning jewel — it’s really a masterpiece, you couldn’t change a note or a word for the better. The “hometown tourist” who was celebrated as a lover of small things in the first half of the album now seems to be a stranger, a bit of a weirdo, vulnerable to awful questions like ‘what are you still doing here?’ There are moments of reassurance — indeed we are at home in this haunted world, but the bad news is that there’s no escaping what we carry with us. And though some places may be designed to bring us — knowing, expectant, and so in control — face to face with these terrible ghosts, the truth is that they also follow us around, and seem to pop up when it’s least convenient. Comfortable and beautiful things — it’s true, they’re all rotting from the inside out. Maybe this is what the melody is trying to teach us when, “Lullaby”-like, it collapses into disorder, approaching noise from the place of music. Maybe you’ll be reminded of Virginia Woolf’s excellent “Street Haunting” essay, the melancholy undertones of which also mix with a kind of exaltation in the sweet pleasure of strolling alone through one’s hometown (where the clotted surfaces of memory are thick and have hardened into layers like limestone). The themes, by now, are familiar. Once again Piner’s gentle echo is delicately ajar. Dylan Lodge on the slide guitar is playful and morose. The bloated corpses are rising, floating (as if pulled backwards in time by a stronger force than gravity) up through the mud — this album is, after all, a product of the Skeleton Park artistic milieu. Energy in the tune builds and breaks, much like that familiar and strange rhythm that pulls us up out of bed and sends us about through the day, only to return us (tidally, incessantly) to our own haunted house of secret and dreamy impressions. It’s a very good walking-around song.

And it’s a very good album for people who are learning how to be alone. Because, impressively, it confronts both faces of solitude — its joyous capacity and its vast expansive edgelessness, in which getting lost (even at home) is all too easy. I happen to know that the theme of ‘being a part’, rather than ‘being apart’, has been important to the artist. *Remastered in Stereo* does give voice to the tender tension between these dimensions of experience. I’m glad it exists.

And for the Minor Gods’ sakes, don’t even get me started on *Freak Fairy Tales*. Just go listen to it, and be changed.