

Musik | Bittles' Magazine

Sinking by **The Aloof** is one of those albums that stick with you throughout your life and it never fails to hit the spot no matter where you are or how you feel. Released in 1996 on *EastWest Records* the LP saw the five-piece move away from their progressive house beginnings to incorporate a more soulful, almost trip hop feel into their sound. Best remembered for the stunning string sequences and melancholy vocals of *One Night Stand*, *Sinking* should be considered one of the great pieces of music of our times. By JOHN BITTLES



With a host of quality releases on the likes of *Cowboy Records* and *Flaw Recording* **The Aloof** created a bit of a stir within the dance music community. Made up of vocalist Ricky Barrow, Jagz Kooner, Gary Burns, Richard Thair and Dean Thatcher, the band explored a world where electronic sounds became much more than shallow bleeps and blips designed solely to get a dance floor to move. Their *Cover The Crime* album from 1994 more than cemented this reputation with a collection of eight long, driving house grooves that worked as well in a club as they did on the stereo at home. Yet it was the pop romanticism of second album *Sinking* which swept the band into my life.

During the mid 90s it seemed as though the ecstasy was losing its power to unite, and there was a huge comedown experienced by a large proportion of the nation's youth. We realised that the party couldn't go on forever, as cold, harsh reality began to fight its way through. Clubs became temples of consumerism, where once again, you couldn't gain entry unless you were wearing the right kind of shoe. The acid house revolution we had been promised had been trampled by the size 10 feet of politics and capitalism until there was nothing left but emptiness and gloom. Suddenly, the music coming out became more thoughtful, reflective, and miserable, reminiscent of our times.

Sinking fits in perfectly with this. Featuring two members of **Sabres Of Paradise** (Gary and Jagz) **The Aloof's** second LP sees the group explore themes of muscularity and feelings of isolation that spoke directly about contemporary urban life. I remember that the album won me over after the very first play. The songs are rich and melancholy, but with a driving house groove that lifts them beyond mere miserable moping and into the realms of the sublime.

Bittersweet opens the album (*One Night Stand (Radio Edit)* on the reissued version, but more on that later) with some gently shuffling percussion, a piano line used sparingly to glorious effect and some heavenly synths. The lyrics which are hidden low in the mix explore themes of broken relationships, addiction, loneliness and regret. It's on the second half of the track though that the song really comes to life. Suddenly, the band's dance influences come to the fore. The keyboard melody rises with a steady pulse, beats explode and a dirty bassline throbs with a thrilling sense of menace. If you aren't grooving by the end of the song then perhaps this isn't the album for you. Don't worry though, as I hear that **Ed Sheeran** chap is pretty darn good.

Stuck On The Shelf is up next and an early highlight of the LP. The opening gambit of “*Too bad you’re stuck up on the shelf. You’re stuck at home lying to yourself*” shows a band willing to expose the heartache and solitude at the core of modern life. The vocals work in perfect tandem with an echoing synth-line that drips with a sense of existential loathing to form a song that could win over even the hardest of hearts. There is a sense of epic and dramatic tension here, which quietly builds over the track’s ten minute duration before suddenly erupting into a chaotic haze that thrills the listener to their core. The repeated mantra of “*Come on ever here and have some fun*” sounds simultaneously seductive and menacing so that it is hard to listen to without a cold shiver running up and down the spine. A song so good that it is hard to stop yourself constantly hitting repeat so you can listen to it again and again.

Wish You Were Here meanwhile is, on first listen, a quiet, contemplative thing. Further plays though reveals that this tranquil air is betrayed by some truly claustrophobic sounding lyrics. To a nursery rhyme melody and a deep, brooding bassline Ricky sings of »*Walls breathing when they should be still.*« while reflecting »*I want to stop it but it’s making me ill*«. If you don’t pay careful attention it is a song which is quite easy to dismiss, yet repeated plays illustrate how it brims with a deep, underlying pathology that captures a feeling of modern angst better than the likes of **Haruki Murakami** ever could.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_GKilfQ3K4

Most people’s highlight would be the ubiquitous and rather wonderful *One Night Stand*. As soon as you hear those strings at the mid point of the album it is vital to hold your heart close so that it doesn’t swoon all the way to the moon. Exploring a vividly depicted allegory of modern male masculinity and all its many faults, the song is a contemporary masterpiece that everyone should hear before they die. Lyrics such as »*What am I doing here. I’ve been here for weeks. Got to get out of this room, and go, go clean the sheets,*« together with the chorus of »*It’s another one night stand. Cause it makes me feel like a real man,*« encapsulate that desperate feeling when you realise that sex can never replace love. But it is the strings that make this such a truly memorable track. Gliding with all the grace and elegance of the world’s finest ballerinas they are soaked in emotion and resonate long after the song has come to an end.

The fearsomely funky *Space Dust* heralds the arrival of the second half of the album (or when you would turn the tape over in the old days) with a rich booming bassline and some echoing keys that would delight even the most vibrant of dance floors. Completely instrumental, the track is a welcome respite from the dark night of the soul lyrical avalanche which came before. *Hot Knives At Lunchtime* continues this journey into the club with a gorgeously deep bass, almost indecipherable vocals and a dramatic sense of rising tension that swirls within the soul.

The exquisite romanticism of *The Last Stand* finishes things off with nine minutes of heart stopping beauty. One could be forgiven for thinking it a mere instrumental version of *One Night Stand*, yet it is so much more than that, as without the sleazy self-destructive vocals the glorious strings are allowed to breath, fly and soar. And when the drums come in at the halfway point it almost seems like too much to bear. I have seen grown men cry openly to this at clubs and it never fails to make me feel both unbelievably sad, yet ecstatic to be alive. As far as endings go this is a complete classic that is very hard to beat.

Thus finishes one of the truly great albums of the 1990s. Elements of house, trip hop, pop, soul, classical and more combine to create one of those masterpieces that is loved by anyone who has been lucky enough to have had it in their lives. Not available to stream on *Spotify*, or to download from *Amazon*, songs such as *Bittersweet*, *One Night Stand* and *What I Miss The Most* can be heard in all their glory on *Youtube*. Second hand copies are available from *Ebay*, *Discogs*, *Amazon* and *Music & Tape Exchange* though, so there really is no excuse not to track a copy of this down and bask in its emotional depth. Last one to get this is a square!

| [JOHN BITTLES](#)