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STEPHEN MALKMUS & THE JICKS (USA)

Sparkle Hard

Label: Domino Records

Release Date: 18.05.2018

Web: stephenmalkmus.com/

EPK: irascible.ch/de/releases/stephen-malkmus-the-jicks/sparkle-hard/

Modesty and plain good manners might prevent them from saying so themselves, but the fact that Stephen Malkmus & The Jicks have thrived, rather than simply endured over 17 years and delivered six albums of buzzy, sub-cultural significance, constitutes an impressive legacy. The challenge with album number seven is one that any successful band with integrity faces: how to safeguard that legacy and hold on to their identity without rehashing old ground (unthinkable), and also say something meaningful while (crucially) having fun doing it?

Meeting that issue head on in the run up to The Jicks' seventh record involved some "navel gazing", according to singer, songwriter and guitarist Malkmus and not only in terms of what it means to be releasing music in 2018. If, like him, you're a voracious consumer of all kinds of culture and feel the need to interact with it, rather than just react, then inevitably "there's a world that prompts you to put your best foot forward". With 'Sparkle Hard' Malkmus, Mike Clark (keyboards), Joanna Bolme (bass) and Jake Morris (drums) do exactly that. And they hit the ground running – on air treads.

It's light 'n' breezy, head-down heavy, audacious, melancholic and reflective, goodtime and bodacious, and it pulls off the smartest trick: it's both unmistakably The Jicks and – due to the streamlining of their trademark tics and turns, plus the introduction of some unexpected flourishes (Auto-Tune! A fiddle! Guest vocalist Kim Gordon! One seven-minute song with an acoustic folk intro!) – The Jicks refashioned. If 2014's *Wig Out At Jag Bags* balanced the lengthy prog workouts of *Pig Lib* with *Mirror Traffic's* sparky pop moments, then *Sparkle Hard* bears less obvious direct relation to what's come before. It also has turbocharged energy and enthusiasm by the truckload.

"It's refining what we're doing," Malkmus explains. "I was trying to keep it direct, for the most part. I've been 'zigzag-y' and I like that, but I wanted to keep it tight, even if there are some long songs. People are quick to get things today; attention is low and there's a lot of noise out there. We're aware of it, so I was thinking about how I could cut through the noise a bit. In a way, that sounds kind of pop, but it's not really – it's just acknowledging the reality of how we all take things in now."

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Malkmus started writing *Sparkle Hard* in 2015. He'd upgraded his home-recording equipment and bought some electronic drums and had been working on the Netflix series *Flaked* (he penned the incidental music and the end theme song). During that period, he was "messing around with different genres and various instruments. I was just working up the kind of songs that I thought would put an album together, so I was a little more focused." Demos were done in one day in April of 2017 and then in May, The Jicks started recording at a new studio in Portland called Halfling, which is managed by multi-instrumentalist Chris Funk of The Decemberists, who produced the album.

The fact that the band was up for "breaking out of a pattern, within reason" has resulted in an album of brilliantly contoured peaks and valleys, that's instantly impactful and full of dynamic contrasts in both sound and mood. Take the languid and slightly forlorn "Solid Silk", a mid-paced slowie with a vivid instrumental passage and sumptuous strings (written and played by Kyleen King) which Malkmus reckons "sounds like it's fall, and you're driving through Vermont on the way to your first day at boarding school". It's radically different from "Bike Lane", which follows. Here, a thick motorik groove is matched with guitar choogling and a glam-punk feel, which is strikingly at odds with the lyrics, that mention the murder in 2015 of Baltimore's Freddie Gray, while he was in police custody: "The cops, the cops that killed Freddie/Sweet young Freddie Gray/They got behind him with their truncheons/And choked the life right out of him/His life expectancy was max. 25". This breaks new ground for Malkmus, but he set the verses in a particular context. "I was looking for a contrast with middle-class, first-world problems – like a bike lane – and was hearing people saying this is a time to huddle with your loved ones and read great novels and ride out this administration. I read about Freddie Gray and felt terrible – he's one of many. It was a contrast in a simple way between something in one bubble, like a bike lane, and this other... thing."

"Rattler" ("a kind of metal sci-fi tune") surprises in a different way altogether: Malkmus uses pitch editing on his voice for the first time. "I'd just bought this plug-in called Nectar and started fooling with it. It was really fun – although you're always worried people are gonna ask what the hell you're doing. But it's not like it's Cher or something," he jokes. Midway through the record is "Shiggy", an insanely gleeful, old-school stomper guaranteed to trigger universal outbreaks of moshing. Malkmus admits that sometimes, "it's nice to just play a four-chord banger".

Clocking in at almost seven minutes, "Kite" features a fragile and folk-ish acoustic intro, some double wah-wah action and a far-out, prog-ish intro to each verse. It's a fresh incarnation of a much slower version of the song that didn't make it onto *Wig Out At Jag Bags*, but was an obvious keeper. As to the content, Malkmus says, "It's a melancholic one, with themes like vulnerability and fear, loneliness, about wanting to connect but wondering how to; it's not self-pity, just... reality."

Self-indulgent escapism has never been The Jicks' bag, but on *Sparkle Hard*, the reality of modern life sits closer to the surface, communication cutting to the chase whether it's a proto-punk grind or a back-porch country duet doing the talking. A cleaner burn for dark and complex times.

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