

MUSIC FOR THE BETTER

Tom Hamill's "life guitar" album 'Ministry of Affect' feels good to listen to

BY NICK SCHROEDER

I doubt there's a ton of folks waiting on Tom Hamill's *Ministry of Affect* to herald the beginning of summer, but I for one am glad it's here.

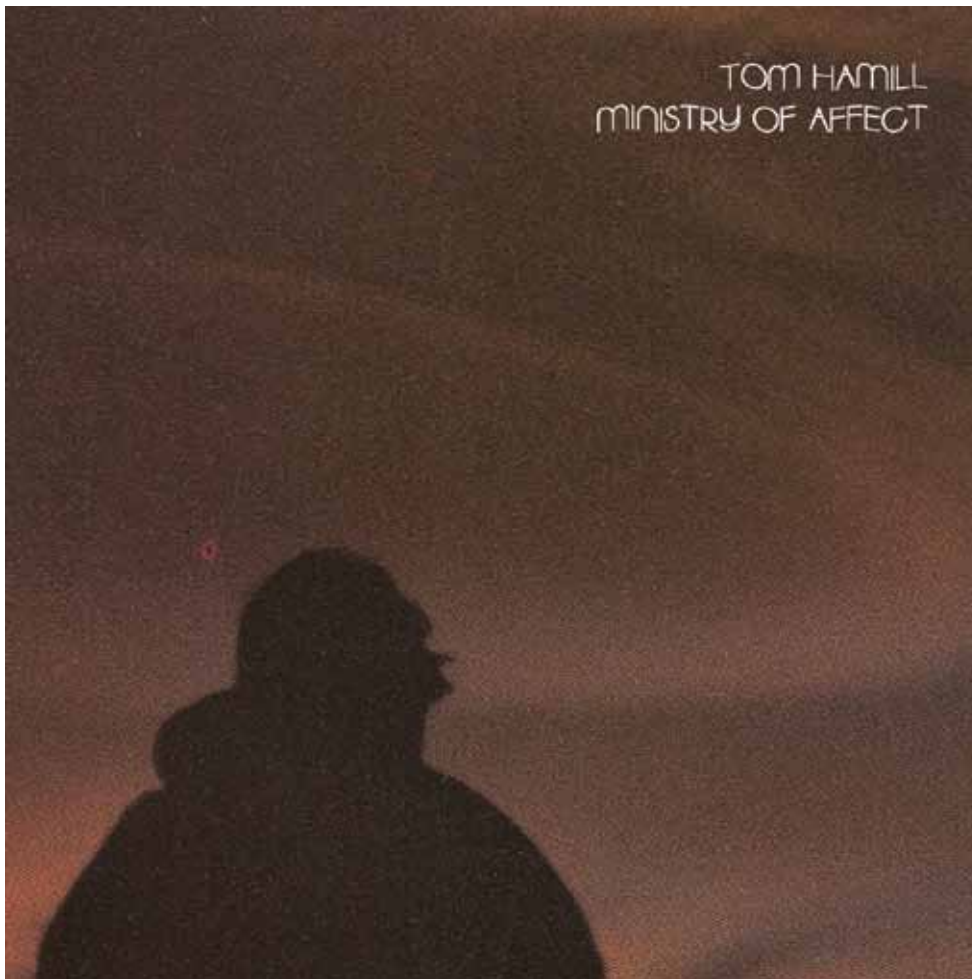
I don't wanna imply that the new album from the Portland-based "life guitarist" is ephemeral or underappreciated (though it is perhaps esoteric). It's just the sort of music — self-produced instrumental psych-pop — that isn't typically propelled by a ton of hype machines. I doubt we'll see a release show at one of the city's breweries, for example.

Still, Tom Hamill's album feels a little like *what we need right now*. That is, a sincere, straightforward album that makes people consider, or reconsider, why they make or consume music.

The thoughtful, introspective Hamill has been pumping out releases of imaginative, nostalgia-laced "life guitar" songs since 2008. It's a vast catalog and there if you need it, though the 18 tracks on this new album have enough depth to keep listeners busy awhile.

Hamill's guitar is a contortionist, but he cares not for virtuosity. The tones and vibes of these compositions vary, but they all prioritize some element of rhythm, calm, good energy, and so on. Lest that sound hokey (or worse, like some contrived reggae-funk imitation), be assured that this is pretty well grounded and informed stuff. It's also wholly accessible — I could see this album played in coffee shops, on warm summer drives, or during study or work sessions. There are obvious shades of Vini Reilly and his longtime Manchester post-punk project the Durutti Column. Some might note Mac DeMarco, too, though Hamill's music seems decidedly less self-conscious.

The midnight cruise riffs of "Mind Shivers" and its cousin track "Save Time For Reflection" gallop along over skuzzy lo-fi programmed beats like something out of Blank Dogs or a less irony-drenched John Maus. "Alone in Mind" is a ruminative folk melody overlain with psychish meanderings that fans of Six Organs of Admittance would enjoy, while "Stressful Meditation," one of the album's gnarliest, gets into My Bloody Valentine territory. A high point is "A Song I've Heard in Other People's Lives," a dizzying track at six-plus minutes where we see Hamill's knack for using repetition and patience to create a sort of



trancelike state, rare terrain for the sort of tightly composed, not-at-all jammy post-rock he's playing with here.

Along with genre descriptors (post-rock, ambient, guitar music, shoegaze, experimental), it's relevant to note that Hamill has also tagged this record (on its Bandcamp listing) with the terms "coping," "healing," "mental health," and "mental illness." (Previous efforts stretching back to 2008 don't carry these tags.) I'd be speculating to guess at any clinical meaning here, but it's helpful to listen to *Ministry of Affect* with these concepts in mind, in a musicological sense. Is this therapy music? Studies have shown that on this issue, your mileage may vary, and as much as I enjoy this stuff, I can imagine plenty of smart friends might be bored by it. But after generations of American musical evolution has brought us to now, where our current constellation of artists seem more like carefully managed icons and sneakily capitalistic idols, it's compelling to think that a future might exist where Americans can start thinking about their relationship to music more like a collective salve against the world's ills, one that's necessary for carrying on. We're already pretty good at thinking of it as a product.

Ministry of Affect | by Tom Hamill | tomhamill.bandcamp.com ©

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