



COLD SPECKS BIO 2014

Like an off-label industrial process or cult ritual conducted in the dead of night, an artery flowing open in spurts or a complex society on the verge of collapse, **Neuroplasticity** is both terrifying and morbidly enthralling to witness. **Cold Specks** has returned, two years and a world map of tours after 2012's *I Predict a Graceful Expulsion*. Hailed as a masterful and wholly original debut, the follow-up is radically expanded, like an announcer realising they hadn't turned on their microphone.

The 26 year-old Canadian singer under the sobriquet Al Spx has been a byword for rare talent and depth of feeling since her arrival in late 2011. In November, in the afterglow of first single 'Holland,' she performed 'Lay Me Down,' and 'Old Stepstone' on Jools Holland. It turned into one of those shared national moments of cutlery-dropping, slack-jawed TV transfexion.

Work on the second album began while holed up in a cottage in Wick, Somerset the following winter. 'In retrospect, I probably didn't choose the most ideal season to live there,' she deadpans. **Neuroplasticity** has since been constructed in fine layers, like a Rothko, building to a full, monolithic opacity.

"The record was mapped out in the cottage. I was there for about three months," she says, "'A Formal Invitation', 'Old Knives' and 'Absisto' were essentially written there. They are the more unusual songs on the record. I may have been reflecting on my surroundings. Have you ever been to Glastonbury? It's a pretty fucked up place."

The time on either side was as new and exciting as it was cruel and exhausting. Presently she was back on the road again in the UK, Europe, the US and Canada. "I relentlessly toured for the first time. Travelling constantly was an odd adjustment at first. I'd always imagined road-trips to be exciting and generally fun. I found it all to be physically and mentally draining. Between tours I was mostly attempting to re-socialise."

The gruelling schedule has awoken her writing to the full possibilities of her ensemble. Her voice is still central but on **Neuroplasticity** the lights have been brought up on the instrumentation and arrangements, which are now deployed more boldly, in wider emotional registers that contend with the voice's dynamism and scope. "I've successfully overcome whatever quarter-life crisis I was having and I think the 'Cold Specks sound' (whatever that means) is fully realised," she says.

This is apparent from the opening strains of 'A Broken Memory,' with its whorls of assiduously-crafted electric sound and in the songs that follow, coloured with a collection of warmly warped keys and synthesizers. At the hands of producer Jim



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Anderson, who with Ben Hillier (Blur, Depeche Mode) mixed the record, they weave their way seamlessly into a texture of lackadaisical, flushed and downbeat folk patterns, intoxicating extended percussion and taste-the-pavement, blackout horns. This is exactly the palette of 'Absisto,' a Gene Clark-meets-Alice Coltrane in the company of Pharaoh Sanders variety of drugged southern gothic. The first track to be heard from the album, it's part lead single, part jazz trip and probably the only song you'll hear this year that simultaneously calls to mind both Bobby Bland and the Stooges' *Fun House*.

"Last summer, I began writing and recording more in Montreal," she remembers, "The majority of the record was written and recorded from July to November at Hotel2Tango. I finished it up at Revolution Recordings in Toronto. I made sure to give myself a lot of time in order to fully realise the record as best as I possibly could. Going into the first few weeks was a little overwhelming as it had gone all dry inside my mind. I wanted to write in a studio environment and I felt they catered best to my 'keep it fucking chill or else' attitude. Although, there's no harm in a little pressure."

The music that results is calm but wild, suggesting the quiet haven from storming activity in which it was made. When Cold Specks wasn't writing or touring, Al Spx was pinballing between asks from an enviable roll call of collaborators and award panels. Shortlisted for the Juno award and Polaris Prize, Spx also worked on Moby's album and was invited to play with Joni Mitchell at the singer's 70th birthday last year alongside the likes of Herbie Hancock. She contributed to Ambrose Akinmusire's new record for Blue Note and the latest Swans album *To Be Kind*.

These last two partnerships have left a significant impression on **Neuroplasticity**. The indomitable Swans founder Michael Gira appears midway through on 'Exit Plan,' and Akinmusire joins him on the holocaust of a closer 'A Season of Doubt' as well as permeating most of the record with trumpet lines of an anguished, cracking frailty.

"I released a cover of 'Reeling the Liars in' as a B-side," she says, referring to the seditious, Faulknerian gospel track on Swans' reincarnation record *My Father Will Guide Me up a Rope to the Sky*, "Michael heard and liked it. I wanted a warm but menacing baritone on certain parts. So, I decided to just ask him. I sent him the songs and he was more than happy to contribute. He'd asked that I sing on his record in exchange. He was incredibly sweet about the whole thing. "

Akinmusire she befriended after the two artists played Joni Mitchell's birthday show in Massey Hall. "We had him for one day in the studio and he recorded everything then. The last song, 'A Season of Doubt' was recorded and arranged in that one day as well. He is one of the most talented individuals I've had the pleasure of working with."



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Absisto, by the way, is the Latin verb for withdraw or depart, and neuroplasticity the process by which it is thought human brains learn. The album dwells upon just this sense of the dark and unknown. The sentiment is contained in microcosm in the closing bars of two songs, 'Let Loose the Dogs' and 'A Season of Doubt,' where to minimal or zero accompaniment Spx repeats the lines "Just a nameless fool, tainted by age/Black-out goodnight, am I wasting your time?" and, at the very end of the album, "I've an unrelenting desire to fall apart." It is bleaker than before perhaps but the wintry feel of Cold Specks material, self-described last time as 'doom soul,' has the quiet power of seeds cracking through ice. The thematic fixation with blood, animals and earth that spills in from the previous LP ensures that the notion of obliteration remains cradled by some intractable cosmic order, however torrid.

In amongst this fine chaos, a delicately finessed production and country streak works its way into songs like 'Old Knives.' Cold Specks has this time amplified the disquiet, doubt and technical avant-gardism that distinguishes them from glossy melancholy, there is nonetheless a mnemonic snapshot conjured of a dash board radio, lashing sheets of rain and the inscrutable emotional disposition of a driving parent. In the final third, this yearning, melodic song explodes into a ravishing atonal ending.

On **Neuroplasticity** Spx's words and delivery capture whatever could be said to exist and be perceptible of something beyond ourselves: as a record of the briefest flicker of consciousness counterbalanced against a roaring urge to return to the darkness.

Neuroplasticity is released on Arts & Crafts on **Aug 26, 2014**.

Praise for *I Predict a Graceful Expulsion*:

"Boasting the talents and a depth of spirit of an artist twice her age, 'I Predict A Graceful Expulsion' is a majestic powerhouse of a career starter"- Drowned In Sound

"The combination of Spx's arresting voice, which sounds like it could have been recorded at any point during the last 100 years, and these grave subjects and arrangements is rousing and beautiful"- The Guardian

"This is a hugely uplifting record and a passionate showcase of musical craftsmanship at its best" - This is fake DIY

"a thing of wonder - rich, deep and stomach-tighteningly emotional."-Q

"Her cryptic lyrics are filled with thoughts of death and divinity. As the words mourn and pray, the music promises redemption."

- New York Times

"...this is the sort of voice that makes you whip the big limo around"

- Pitchfork



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